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THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY AND CUBA: HOW THE TRAP OF SUCCESS
LED TO THE BAY OF PIGS

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ABSTRACT

This research looks at how covert operations in Iran and Guatemala shaped the decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion, and why the United States government embarked on an operation that had little chance of success. Key areas of discussion are the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its role in the removal of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq (Iran) and President Jacobo Arbenz (Guatemala), the Dulles faction, the anti-Castro program, and President Kennedy's relationship with the CIA. Upon examining these areas, the study shows that the covert action success in Iran and Guatemala fueled American hubris and obviated the recognition of warning signs, which led to the approval of an operation doomed to fail.

INDEX WORDS: Central Intelligence Agency, Cuba, Bay of Pigs, John F. Kennedy, Iran, Guatemala, Fidel Castro.

TO MY BEAUTIFUL WIFE ANGELICA

Thank you for your unwavering support. Thank you for putting up with many long weekends where going out and spending time together meant sitting in the couch watching TV while I wrote all day. Thank you for your unconditional love and understanding. I love you. Te amo.

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Introduction

In Cuba, the regime frames the Bay of Pigs as *La primera derrota del imperialismo en America Latina* (Imperialism's first defeat in Latin America). I grew up listening and reading how the "Revolution," under the unwavering leadership of Fidel Castro, defeated the "Yankees" on the shores of *Playa Giron* (Giron Beach). Within the Cuban exile community in Miami, the narrative is strikingly different. As a Cuban émigré living in Little Havana, I learned that the Cuban exile force failed not because of Castro's military genius, but because of Kennedy's betrayal; his decision to cancel the critical D-Day air strikes. Exposed to both sides of the story and being a military officer made me want to reexamine the Bay of Pigs from a strictly military viewpoint. However, I realized that a postmortem of the military action would become mostly speculation and it has already been done; it would have been a case of filtered wine into an old bottle. It might have been justified if this was a Military Masters program at the Command and General Staff College, but not for a MA in history.

Instead, the focus of my project centers on answering a simple historical question: Why did the United States embark on an operation knowing it had little chance of success? To answer that question, a researcher must get into the decision-making process; into the mindset of the individuals and agencies who made the decision. Through my research, it became evident that a culture existed within the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) based on an abiding faith in the efficacy of covert operations. The Cold War mentality informed United States foreign relations; in the 1950s, historians speak of the primacy of foreign over domestic policy. In the struggle of good versus evil – like a John Ford western – the good guys wore white hats and the bad guys wore black. There was no place for shades of gray. This mindset prompted the Eisenhower administration, through CIA-orchestrated covert actions, to overthrow two lawfully elected

governments: The administration of Mossadeq in Iran and Arbenz in Guatemala. Although successful, the deposing of Mossadeq and Arbenz had little to do with the efficient operations of the Agency – they were both shambles – yet they provided the Eisenhower administration with the outcomes it sought, all with “plausible deniability” of direct American involvement – high yield, low cost operations. These two “false positives” fueled CIA hubris in planning the overthrow of Castro in Cuba. The thinking underlying the thesis worked backward from President John F. Kennedy’s decision to give the operation the green light but proceeds chronologically by examining CIA actions in Iran and Guatemala. Both provided the template for Cuba.

On-line depositories provide a graduate student remote access to storehouses of primary documents. The most valuable archive is the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room in the Central Intelligence Agency Online Library that provided an array of recently declassified documents pertaining to Guatemala, and the in-house CIA *History of the Bay of Pigs Operation*. Another goldmine for declassified sources, particularly for Iran but also Cuba, is the National Security Archives at George Washington University. Internal memos and a collection of oral histories of participants in the decision are available at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum site. For published primary materials, the relevant volumes in the State Department’s series, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, is indispensable. As far as possible, the story is told through these sources.

Primarily, the focus for most academic work on the Bay of Pigs has been the tactical execution of the operation. Usually, these studies rely on the Taylor Committee’s findings – which determined that the immediate causes were tactical – to explain why the operation failed. They attribute the defeat to a shortage of ammunition and the decision to cancel the critical D-

Day airstrikes to neutralize Castro's air force, thus reinforcing the Taylor group's findings. There is also the work of apologists, such as Arthur Schlesinger and Theodore Sorensen, who published monographs exonerating Kennedy from any culpability and blaming the CIA and the JCS for ill-advising the president on the operation. On the other hand, CIA apologists like Grayston L. Lynch blamed President Kennedy for the failure. As the title of his book suggest, *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs*, Lynch accuses Kennedy of betraying the invasion force for political reasons. Therefore, this research is not about the apologists' points of view, the cancellation of the airstrikes, the battle at the beachhead or the surrender, but on how the U.S. government's feverish reliance on covert action turned into a trap.

In the last chapter of *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention*, Richard Immerman observed "There are a number of schools of thought regarding the reasons for the Bay of Pigs debacle, but none of them attribute much weight to the CIA's earlier triumph" [in Guatemala]. Although libraries of books deal with the United States foreign policy and the CIA in this period, none specifically answers Immerman's challenge. And to understand the Bay of Pigs, the overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala and the counter-coup in Iran must also feature in the discussion. Obviously, a MA thesis will not fill this gap; but a modest attempt has been made.

Chapter 1: The Dulles Faction and The Rise of Covert Operations

The beginning of the 1960s was a volatile period for the United States. During this period, the Cold War reached an unprecedented crescendo due to a series of consequential events. The downing of an American U-2 spy plane on May 1, 1960 and the collapse of the U.S.-Soviet summit in Paris that same month exacerbated the existing animus between the world's superpowers. Already, the Marshal Plan, the division of Germany and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had done much to sour Soviet-American relations by negating Soviet influence over Western Europe. The territory beyond the border of East Germany became barren ground for Communism. With the lines in Western and Eastern Europe clearly defined, the ideological struggle between communism and capitalism found fertile ground in the underdeveloped nations of the Third World.

During this juncture, American policy makers recognized that in order to prevent the expansion of Communism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, they must address the serious socio-economic problems plaguing these regions requiring long-term solutions: land reform and augmented agricultural productivity; improvement in health care and education; and most important, combatting corruption and laying the foundation for democratization. However, these long-term solutions required an unpredictable investment of time to implement; and what the U.S. government sought was a radical, immediate, and short-term response to deal with the nonmilitary aspects in the struggle to resist Soviet expansion. Covert American involvement in the affairs of Third World countries became the preferred *modus operandi* not only to tip the scale of socio-political events in favor of U.S. national interest, but also to reduce the risk of a military confrontation with the Soviet Union. At the time, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was the only organization within the U.S. government capable of executing this type of

unconventional policies. The American involvement in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq of Iran and President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala would set the stage for one of the biggest foreign policy fiascos in modern U.S history: The Bay of Pigs.

The Counter-Coup in Iran

In 1952, the U.S and Great Britain saw political developments in Iran as a serious threat to western interests. British and American officials did not welcome Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq's plan to nationalize Iran's oil industry. British sanctions and Mossadeq's policies had placed Iran on the edge of an economic abyss. In addition, Mossadeq manipulated the constitution, prolonging his tenure in office. In order to consolidate his position, he weakened the power of the shah and the army and mobilized progressive elements—most threatening in western eyes—including the Communist Party of Iran (Tudeh). In common with many of his contemporary populist nationalist leaders, Mossadeq partnered with Communists in the hope of advancing his political agenda; and in return, Tudeh viewed Mossadeq as a tool to get rid of the shah. Western intelligence had assessed that with the shah out of the picture, a Tudeh takeover of the government was inevitable. In view of these factors, the British and American governments could not allow Iran to fall into the hands of communism. "If that happened," opined a not unbiased CIA historian, "it would mean a victory for the Soviets in the Cold War and a major setback for the West in the Middle East."¹

Mossadeq, a western educated and secular modernist, became prime minister in spring 1951 when the shah appointed him after the Majlis (parliament) nominated him by a vote of 79–12. As leader of the Nationalist Front, Mossadeq was an outspoken opponent of foreign

¹ Donald Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran: November 1952 – August 1953* (Washington: CIA's Clandestine Services History, 1954), viii. http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/#_ftn4 (accessed December 19, 2016).

manipulations of Iranian affairs. Soon after his election, Mossadeq made the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) a policy priority. The shah's opposition prompted Mossadeq's resignation and replacement. The removal of Mossadeq ignited a series of widespread demonstrations demanding his reinstatement.²

The biggest beneficiaries of the July 1952 riots were Mossadeq and the Tudeh. Confronted by these unexpected displays of popular opposition to the monarchy, and unsure of western support, the shah panicked and reinstated Mossadeq as prime minister – it would not be the last time the shah cracked under pressure. The shah's capitulation eroded the trust and loyalty of his security forces. The inaction resulted in repeated diatribes against his person and authority. Anti-shah slogans, such as "Traitor Shah, Abdicate," appeared all over walls along Teheran's main avenues.³ Meanwhile, Tudeh operatives took the initiative in the early stages of the demonstrations to create a de facto alliance with Mossadeq's Nationalist Front, and Mossadeq seized the opportunity to aggressively consolidate his power with a calculated mix of legality and violence.

Left without options to remedy the state of affairs in Iran, the American government opted for a covert action plan to remove Mossadeq. In March 1953, then undersecretary of state in the Eisenhower administration and formerly Truman's director of Central Intelligence, Walter Bedell Smith, assessed that the "U.S Government could no longer approve of the Mossadeq government and would prefer a successor government in which there would be no National Frontists."⁴ Shortly after, the CIA received the "green light" from the Eisenhower administration

² Daniel Crosswell, *Beetle: The Life of General Walter Bedell Smith* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 65-66.

³ CIA Cable, "The Iranian Situation," 3 March 1953, Iran Communiques File, George Washington University National Security Archives, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/index.html> (accessed December 19, 2016).

⁴ Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, 2.

to execute the TPAJAX Project. Aside from triggering the downfall of Mossadeq, the operation had other objectives: reestablish the power of the shah; replace an overtly nationalist government with one that would govern Iran according to acceptable Western democratic principles; create favorable conditions for an oil deal that would allow Iran to become “economically sound and financially solvent;” and eliminate once and for all the “dangerously strong Communist Party.”⁵

Earlier, the Truman administration “sanctioned undertaking ‘special political measures’ to destabilize Iran, code for covert operation.”⁶ The finishing touches were added to a detailed covert operations plan which Truman approved on 8 January 1953, twelve days before Dwight D. Eisenhower’s inauguration, setting a dangerous precedent for handing over covert plans for CIA-led operations from an outgoing to an incoming administration.

The CIA conducted a comprehensive assessment, “Factors Involved in the Overthrow of Mossadeq,” in April 1953. Planners concluded that the operation enjoyed a “reasonable chance of success” as long as it had the support of the shah and General Fazlollah Zahedi.⁷ The shah’s involvement was essential because he still commanded support and was commander in chief of the armed forces. His participation would ensure the legitimacy of Mossadeq’s removal and secure the cooperation of the military garrisons around Teheran. The CIA considered Zahedi a “suitable successor” because he was the only prominent figure with significant political gravitas capable of opposing Mossadeq. Earlier in the year he entered into discussions with officials at the American embassy raising the idea of overthrowing Mossadeq. In addition, the report identified the difficulties and importance of maintaining operational security, but downplayed the

⁵ Ibid, iii-iv.

⁶ Crosswell, *Beetle*, 66.

⁷ Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952 – August 1953*, Appendix B.

effects that a breach might have on the outcome of the operation.⁸ This lack of foresight might have had a devastating effect on the operation.

Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles assigned his best Middle East operative, Kermit “Kim” Roosevelt, to oversee the execution of the coup. A member of the Oyster Bay branch of the family, Roosevelt, after teaching at Harvard, had joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in 1950. He was to oversee a coup that consisted of hefty bribes to members of parliament, leaders of splinter parties and newspaper editors and owners to spearhead an aggressive anti-Mossadeq propaganda campaign. The media launched a merciless campaign of character assassination. The morning headlines highlighted the pervasive corruption of Mossadeq’s government, his insatiable thirst for power, even pointing to his “Jewish ancestry.”⁹ The goal centered on undermining Mossadeq’s coalition. The assumption was that Mossadeq could not survive a weak and divided coalition. “If these efforts failed in toppling Mossadeq, the last resort was a military coup led by the CIA’s picked successor, GEN Fazlollah Zahedi.”¹⁰

Convincing the shah to participate in the operation was not an easy task. Unlike his father, the shah suffered from a “weak spine.” The monarch favored the operation, but was reluctant to lend his participation. The CIA needed the shah to issue a series of *firman*s (royal decrees) dismissing Mossadeq, appointing Zahedi as the new prime minister, and calling on the Army to remain loyal to the Crown. The Agency relied on the shah’s strong-willed twin sister to persuade the monarch to commit to the operation. Finally, on 15 August 1953, after being reassured of unequivocal American support, the shah issued the royal decrees.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ray Takeyh, “The Myth of an American Coup: What really happened in Iran in 1953,” *The Weekly Standard*, June 17, 2013. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/myth-american-coup/article/733935?nopager=1> (accessed January 19, 2017).

¹⁰ Crosswell, *Beetle*, 67.

The following night, with the *firmans* in hand, the chief of the shah's bodyguard, Colonel Nematollah Nassiri, proceeded to arrest Mossadeq. When Nassiri's detachment arrived at Mossadeq's quarters, superior forces loyal to the prime minister gave them an unpleasant welcome. Nassiri and his men had no choice but to surrender. Upon hearing the ominous news, the shah reacted as he normally did: cracking under the pressure and uncertainty of the moment, he fled to Italy via Iraq. GEN Zahedi remained in hiding under CIA protection. Roosevelt received an urgent cable from Washington recommending a hasty departure from Teheran. Citing safety risks, the message stated that Roosevelt leave "at the earliest moment." The CIA operation had failed.¹¹

Explaining the fiasco in Teheran, Bedell Smith told Eisenhower the shah and the generals vacillated, giving Mossadeq the opportunity to respond with a counter coup. "Mossadeq apparently found out what was happening," Smith stated, "the old boy wouldn't accept [the shah's *firmans*] and arrested the messenger and everybody else involved that he could get his hand on."¹² Smith's statement was partially correct, the shah's indecisiveness helped Mossadeq, but this alone does not explain the failure. The main culprit had been the sloppy work of the CIA. Throughout the operation, the Agency had relied on loose and desultory security measures – native agents were not properly vetted; biographical data on key figures was substandard; and there was no real understanding of how cultural behaviors, norms, and idiosyncrasies affected security. For example, the CIA agents relied on unsecured Iranian telegraph lines to pass along secret information knowing that Tudeh and Mossadeq agents had infiltrated the government

¹¹ Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: Four Who Dared: The Early Years of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 109; Takeyh, "The Myth of an American Coup," <http://www.weeklystandard.com/myth-american-coup/article/733935?nopager=1> (accessed January 19, 2017); Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran*, viii.

¹² Crosswell, *Beetle*, 68.

communication systems.¹³ By March 1953, it became evident to everyone that Mossadeq's government had uncovered details of the operation. The prime minister unleashed a series of vitriolic accusations against the American government for fomenting political and civil unrest. "Mossadeq and his followers in the Majlis [Iranian Parliament] are blaming the Americans and specifically the American ambassador for 'encouraging' the shah to remain and 'resist Mossadeq,' thus precipitating the present disturbances," a CIA cable read.¹⁴ Similarly, another cable alerted Washington about the success of the operation. Details of the plot had spread through the Iranian capital like wildfire. Everyone, including Mossadeq, knew of an impending coup d'etat. An official cable included the following prophetic recommendation: "unless the coup is launched within the next twenty-four hours (sometimes between 6 and 7 March), there is little chance of success."¹⁵

Meanwhile, Mossadeq diligently worked at breakneck speed to quell his opposition. In early summer, orders were issued to the police to arrest individuals suspected of anti-government agitation. Without hesitation, Mossadeq dismissed the Grand Master of the Royal Court (Gholam Reza Murzad) and the civilian adjutant to the shah (Abol Fath Valatbar) for alleged conspiracy against the government, and arrested all religious leaders who had spoken against him. According to a CIA report, the police arrested "the last of 'ten or twelve mullahs' allegedly active against the government."¹⁶ It is hardly a surprise that Mossadeq foiled the CIA's plan.

¹³ Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952 – August 1953*, Appendix E.

¹⁴ Cable, "The Iranian Situation March 1953," 12 March 1953, Iran Communiques File, George Washington University National Security Archives, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/index.html> (accessed December 21, 2016).

¹⁵ Cable, "Iran: Rumored Coup d'état," 12 March 1953, Iran Communiques File, George Washington University National Security Archives, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/index.html> (accessed December 21, 2016).

¹⁶ Cable, "Measures Taken by Mossadeq to Quell Opposition," 2 June 1953, Iran Communiques File, George Washington University National Security Archives, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/ciacase/index.html> (accessed December 20, 2016).

The unsavory news created a solemn mood within CIA headquarter. Based on the Agency's in-house history of the operation, the leadership and the staff "spent a day featured by depression and despair."¹⁷ However, the plotters' luck changed when an undeterred Zahedi decided to reverse the outcome. Relying on very limited CIA support, Zahedi renewed his efforts to remove Mossadeq. The only viable course of action was delegitimizing Mossadeq's right to continue controlling the country. Zahedi understood the dynamics of the Persian character, the symbolic value the royal family exerted within Iranian society, and the important role of the shah in Iranian politics. The population needed to know that Mossadeq no longer possessed the constitutional authority to lead the government. With the peculiar equanimity of a military officer, he ordered the publication of the shah's *firmans* decreeing Mossadeq's dismissal and the appointment of Zahedi as the new prime minister. Consequently, Zahedi reached out to army commanders asking for their support in defending the monarchy. This was a valiant effort by Zahedi, but it remained highly unlikely a military-backed coup would have succeeded. Zahedi had been out of the military for several years and barely knew any of the current commanders.¹⁸ Many of them would not have risked their careers and life for an obscure retired general. On top of this, Mossadeq commanded fear and respect, and had filled the rank and file of the armed forces with informants.

Ironically, the departure of the shah turned the tide in favor of Zahedi. Once it became publicly known that the shah fled the country because of nefarious circumstances involving Mossadeq and the *firmans*, mobs of enraged demonstrators took to the streets demanding the prime minister's ouster. Though the CIA had paid demonstrators for participating in the unrest, their numbers were insignificant. Much larger spontaneous crowds from all social classes came

¹⁷ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 109.

¹⁸ Wilbur, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran, November 1952 – August 1953*, Appendix E.

out in support of the shah. According to a CIA report, "the flight of the shah brought home to the populace in a dramatic way how far Mossadeq had gone and galvanized the people into irate pro-shah force."¹⁹ U.S ambassador Loy Henderson corroborated the CIA's assessment, referring to the protesters as "not of hoodlum type customarily predominant in recent demonstrations in Tehran," but of "all classes of people, including workers, clerks, shopkeepers, and students."²⁰ By the end of August 1953, Mossadeq had been arrested, Zahedi was in full control of the government, and the shah returned to Iran.

The Iranians themselves, not the Americans, caused the fall of Mossadeq – the CIA simply stood on the sidelines in complete sullenness. Roosevelt remained in a "safe house drinking lime rickeys and listening to the Broadway show tune 'Luck Be a Lady Tonight'."²¹ Fortunately for him and the CIA, luck indeed was on their side. Realizing the operation had been a complete fiasco, Roosevelt declined an offer to run a similar operation in Guatemala, choosing to provide provident advice instead. Roosevelt warned his CIA bosses about the importance of understanding the operational environment; famously stating that for this type of covert operation, "we must be absolutely sure that people and army want what we want."²²

Although Agency carelessness had induced the derailment of TPAJAX, the bosses at Langley considered it a "victory" because the endstate had been achieved: the removal of Mossadeq. Overwhelmed by the outcome and the exuberance that followed, top CIA officials like Allen Dulles and his chief of covert operations, Frank Wisner, overlooked the many flaws of the operation. They promoted an embellished assessment of the Agency's role and performance, even when the official after-action review (AAR) painted a different picture. In the eyes of many

¹⁹ Takeyh, "The Myth of an American Coup."

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 109.

²² Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 210.

in Washington, Iran confirmed the efficacy of covert action, and Guatemala would become its validation.

Guatemala

Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, known as “the Big Blonde” among supporters, became the president of Guatemala after defeating General Miguel Ydigoras Fuentes in an election in which he won 60 percent of the vote. The son of a Swiss pharmacist, he had contemplated a career as a scientist or engineer, but after the tragic and unexpected death of his father, he decided on attending the Guatemalan military academy. Intelligent and charismatic, Arbenz rose quickly through the ranks. After marrying the daughter of a rich Salvadorian landowner, Arbenz became deeply involved in politics; resulting in his involvement with the popular uprising that overthrew dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944. Later, as the defense minister for President Juan Jose Arevalo, he became a zealous supporter of the president’s progressive policies and played an important part in the purges of Aranista officers – officers who had supported a right-wing conspiracy to overthrow the government of President Arevalo.²³

When he officially took office in March 1951, the idealistic Arbenz planned on continuing Arevalo’s legacy. He launched an aggressive program of social reform unlike any before in Latin America. Discarding the mantra of empty rhetoric that had typified previous Central American politicians, the young president made a herculean effort to enact major reforms in key areas like voting rights, the labor sector, and political activism. Like Mossadeq in Iran, he formed an alliance with progressive elements and legalized the Communist-affiliated Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo (PGT). The most popular and controversial policy consisted of

²³ Nicholas Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS: The United States and Guatemala 1952-1954* (Washington: CIA’s History Staff Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), 12.
<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB4/docs/doc05.pdf> (accessed December 2016).

Arbenz's massive land reform. Known as Decree 900, this ambitious agrarian reform program aimed to create a rural yeomanry free from the tyranny of the Guatemalan latifundia. The policy consisted of expropriating and redistributing idle land among peasants in plots ranging from eight to thirty-three acres. In return, peasants would pay the government an annual fee. The American-owned United Fruit Company (UFCO) – the biggest landowner in Guatemala – lost a massive 234,000 acres of land in 1953; followed by another significant confiscation of 173,000 acres a year later. The expropriation led to cries of communism, and prompted an exaggerated response from the American company, even when Arbenz' government offered bonds as compensation.²⁴

Unhappy with the situation in Guatemala, UFCO's boss, Sam "The Banana Man" Zemurray, initiated a vigorous public relations campaign denouncing the actions of the Guatemalan government as a Communist plot against American economic interest. Washington welcomed the lobbying, in part because senior officials in the government, such as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, who became the CIA director, had worked for the board of United Fruit's partner, the J. Henry Shroeder Banking Corporation. Others were stockholders and staunch supporters of the company. Bedell Smith would later sit on the UFCO board.²⁵

Economic considerations did not constitute the sole, definitive reason for Washington's interest in the events unfolding in Guatemala. The American cold war ethos, predicated on combating the spread of Communist influence, induced policymakers to accept the unequivocal assertion that Communist influence in Guatemala represented a real, existential threat to U.S. security in the hemisphere. Since 1950 the idea of a possible American intervention floated

²⁴ Ibid, 13.

²⁵ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 111.

through the halls of congress. To many politicians, Arbenz's cozy relationship with the PGT was an indication of the magnitude of Communist influence inside the Guatemalan government.

Tracy Barnes, a top CIA official, pointed out the prevailing view in Washington: "It's not just a question of Arbenz... nor of Guatemala. We have solid intelligence that the Soviets intend to throw substantial support to Arbenz. Given Soviet backing, that spells trouble in all of Central America. An easily expandable beachhead."²⁶ Without knowing it, Arbenz had infringed on the same cardinal rules that Mossadeq had violated: cooperating with Communist-affiliated parties and targeting American economic interest. The die was cast. He had to go.

Unsurprisingly, Allen Dulles and many of his protégés in the CIA became the main proponents for removing Arbenz from power. Still riding high in the wake of the Iran operation, Dulles sought to convince politicians in Washington of the necessity for urgent action; after all, Iran had shown the Agency's ability to solve problems with artful, quick, and high-yield/low-risk covert operations. By 1952, intelligence analysts estimated that the only solution to the Guatemalan threat was clandestine action. One report, dated 9 July 1952, recommended immediate American involvement, stating that "success of any action undertaken [inside Guatemala] without outside support is questionable and may well result in the elimination of all effective anti-Communist opposition."²⁷ The State Department became the first place where the Agency went for support. According to the CIA's own in-house history, "they began to look for State Department officials who shared their pessimism about overt remedies and to find assets in

²⁶ Ibid, 112.

²⁷ Memorandum for Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, "Guatemala Situation," 9 July 1952, Document 0000135860, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000135860.pdf (accessed March 01, 2017).

Central America around which to build a covert program.”²⁸ The help and support they sought would come from an unlikely source: the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Garcia.

Known as “Tacho” among his closest associates, Somoza was a right-wing dictator who ruled Nicaragua from 1937 until his assassination in 1956. The son of a wealthy coffee planter, Somoza spent the early part of his life in Philadelphia, where he attended and graduated college. In the 1940s, the Roosevelt administration had treated Somoza as a pariah, but the Cold War elevated his status to that of “Washington’s best friend in Latin America.”²⁹ During a state visit to the U.S in the spring of 1952, Somoza boastfully volunteered to “clean up Guatemala.” Truman listened with skepticism to what the loquacious Somoza had to say, and after their meeting, instructed DCI Bedell Smith to explore this option.

Smith confirmed that Somoza, with the help of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, was harboring a disgruntled, anti-Arbenz exile named Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas – a frail-looking ex-military officer who had been removed and arrested by Arbenz during the purge of Aranista officers. After spending some time in prison, Castillo Armas had managed to escape to Honduras, where, under the patronage of Somoza and with tacit approval from the Honduran government, he renewed efforts to overthrow Arbenz by recruiting rightist exiles. For Smith, this was an auspicious opportunity to remove Arbenz without significant American involvement. He ordered Deputy Director Allen Dulles to begin working on a plan for supplying arms to Castillo Armas’ band of dissidents. As CIA planners worked on the proposal, Smith convinced the State

²⁸ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 17.

²⁹ Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 120.

Department to support the operation. On 9 September 1952, Smith officially authorized Operation PBFORTUNE.³⁰

PBFORTUNE became the CIA's first attempt at overthrowing President Arbenz. The plan called for the shipment of weapons disguised as farm equipment inside United Fruit Company containers. The chief of the western hemisphere division, Colonel J.C King, acquired and scheduled the delivery of an assortment of weapons: rifles, pistols, machine guns, and hand grenades. However, agents in Nicaragua qualified the shipment as insufficient when a thorough review of arms and equipment requirements revealed the necessity for additional allotments.³¹ "The additional arms and equipment asked for are believed very necessary to meet anticipated operational requirements," a CIA cable stated.³² Unfortunately, neither the initial shipment nor the request for additional military hardware arrived.

From its inception, Smith's main preoccupation was maintaining the integrity of operational security and plausible deniability of the operation. He shared the same concerns with Secretary Acheson about the ramifications of a blown operation. The Truman administration had continued to build on Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy by pledging non-interference in the domestic affairs of Latin American nations. Any leaks revealing American meddling in the overthrow of a democratically elected government would engender serious backlash and undermine the positive progress already achieved in U.S-Latin American relations. All these

³⁰ Gerald Haines, *CIA and Guatemala Assassination Proposals 1952-1954* (Washington: CIA History Staff Analysis, 1995), 2. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB4/docs/doc01.pdf> (accessed March 9, 2017); Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 18-19.

³¹ Ibid.

³² SEEKFOR to J.C King, "Amended Arms and Ammunition requirements," 18 September 1952, Document 0000915020, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000915020.pdf (accessed March 9, 2017).

factors, coupled with the lack of trust in Somoza's ability to keep a secret, raised Smith's skepticism about the success of the operation.³³

The Nicaraguan dictator, prone to unrestricted talk, wasted no time in divulging the details of his "American connection" to fellow strongmen in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Venezuela – all in an effort to enlist their support. To make matters worse, during a diplomatic meeting in Panama, Somoza's son, "Tachito," committed the indiscretion of asking Inter-American Affairs Assistant Secretary Edward Miller about the "agricultural machinery." This prompted other diplomats to make the same indiscreet inquiries to State Department officials. The incident spooked the State Department, and CIA officials confirmed their "general belief that no Latin American can be trusted to keep his mouth shut."³⁴ The indiscretion of Somoza's son precipitated the downfall of the operation. On 8 October 1952, Secretary Acheson told Smith to pull the plug. The cancellation of PBFORTUNE irked the CIA's covert action enthusiasts.³⁵

Since Agency planners did not share Smith's doubts, they never anticipated a cancellation nor planned for a contingency. The Agency's knee-jerk reaction consisted of redirecting the arms shipment to Panama and retaining Castillo Armas and his proxy force on the payroll in case Washington had a change of heart. Colonel King remained undeterred, and wanted to keep the operation on life support. He asked for Smith's permission to develop

³³ Crosswell, *Beetle*, 70.

³⁴ J.C King, "Memorandum for Record," 8 October 1952, Document 24, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, Guatemala, eds. Susan Holly and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2003), 36. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54Guat/d24> (accessed March 11, 2017).

³⁵ Cable, J.C King to SEEKFORD, "New Plans of CALLIGERIS as a Result of Loss of Arms Support by the Group," 28 October 1952, Document 0000924046, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000924046.pdf (accessed March 11, 2017); Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 120.

capabilities for transporting arms from Panama to Nicaragua. Smith felt it prudent to keep the operation afloat, so he obliged. In the end, King's project yielded no fruit.³⁶

To make matters worse, the anti-Communist movement in Guatemala launched a premature, ill-fated rebellion against Arbenz' government. The key leaders behind the operation were Colonel Julio Pablo Garcia y Garcia, Colonel Roberto Barrios Pena, and Carlos Simmons. Several days before the uprising, Garcia y Garcia traveled to Cuba to meet with contacts in the island to request assistance for the operation, and Barrios Pena visited El Salvador. While both men were abroad, a penetration agent from the Guatemalan government convinced Carlos Simmons to act precipitously – the agent hoped that a premature revolt would bring to light the entire anti-Communist organization existing in Guatemala.³⁷ Influenced by the agent and motivated by personal ambition, Simmons informed Garcia y Garcia and Barrios Pena about his intention to carry out the operation on Good Friday (27 March 1953). They attempted to dissuade Simmons by underscoring the high probability of failure, but despite the warning, the ambitious Simmons, along with three hundred rebels, attacked the army garrison in the town of Salama, Baja Verapaz Province.³⁸

During the initial stages of the assault, the rebels came down from the surrounding mountains and captured the town's plaza; blocking key avenues of approach and holding hostage

³⁶ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 20; Crosswell, *Beetle*, 71.

³⁷ CIA Report, "Revolutionary Movement in Guatemala," 05 May 1953, Document 0000914489, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914890.pdf (accessed March 2017).

³⁸ Memorandum, "Background Information on Castillo Armas and The Salama Uprising," 29 March 1953, Document 0000928378, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000928378.pdf (accessed March 2017); CIA Report, "Revolutionary Movement in Guatemala," 05 May 1953, Document 0000914489, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914890.pdf (accessed March 2017).

the provincial governor and his son. The rebels' success lasted until Sunday evening when government forces counterattacked and recaptured the town. Many of the rebels fled to the mountains pursued by government forces, while others were imprisoned. The failed uprising delivered a severe blow to the anti-Arbenz movement within Guatemala, and diminished Castillo Armas' capability to topple the president. In the aftermath of the attack, Arbenz declared a national emergency and unleashed the government security apparatus against dissidents with brutal precision. The Comité Cívico Nacional – one of the most organized anti-Communist groups inside Guatemala and the biggest supporter of Castillo Armas – ceased to exist as an effective organization. Many opposition leaders were either detained, executed under the nefarious *ley fuga* (executing prisoners who allegedly attempted to escape), or sought asylum in foreign embassies.³⁹

Intelligence analysts painted a murky picture of the situation in Guatemala. The ill-timed rebellion cost the CIA “all its assets inside the country and was left to deal with contentious and fragmented exile groups.”⁴⁰ One National Intelligence Estimate, dated 8 May 1953, assessed the opposition to be too weak and divided to “alter the course of the government by political action,” and could not “succeed in a revolutionary attempt opposed by the army.” Only the army could “rapidly and decisively” alter the political situation, however, its leaders remained loyal to

³⁹ Cable, CIA to Department of State, 31 March 1953, Document 0000914936, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914936.pdf (accessed March 2017); Cable, CIA representative to DCI, 30 March 1953, Document 0000914938, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914938.pdf (accessed March 2017); Cable, “PBFORTUNE Situation Report,” 8 April 1953, Document 0000914913, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914913.pdf (accessed March 2017); Cable, CIA Representative to DCI, 26 April 1953, Document 0000914901, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914901.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴⁰ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 21.

President Arbenz. As long as Arbenz had the backing of the Army, his alliance with the PGT would “continue to dominate Guatemalan politics.” The Estimate concluded by highlighting the fact that any significant rise in political tension would only increase Arbenz’ dependency on the Communist alliance. This was the precarious situation that Allen Dulles inherited when he became the new Director of the Central Intelligence Agency in February 1953.⁴¹

The Dulles Faction

In the book, *The Very Best Men*, Evan Thomas highlights that under the leadership of Allen Dulles, the CIA entered a new era of covert operations. “Instead of pulling back and consolidating,” Thomas stated, “the CIA became more bold and reckless.”⁴² The changing of the guard between Dulles and Smith marked a major shift in operational philosophy and policymaking. Smith never shared Dulles’ enthusiasm for covert operations. Smith ran allied headquarters in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and northwest Europe during the war and as chief of staff possessed plenty of grounds for dismissing the effectiveness of covert operations given the many failures during the war; many of them orchestrated by Dulles as OSS—wartime forerunner of the CIA—station chief in Switzerland. His conservative view on the capabilities and application of clandestine activities made him a skeptic, and as a result, Smith “blunted many covert operation initiatives.”⁴³ He viewed covert action enthusiasts, like Allen Dulles and Frank Wisner, with suspicion because they often colluded to undermine his policies. As a result of this distrust, both men routinely became the recipients of violent manifestations of Smith’s wrath. Dulles tended to laugh it off by saying, “The General was in fine form this morning,

⁴¹ National Intelligence Estimate 84, “Probably Developments in Guatemala,” 8 May 1953, Document 0000914889, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, 3-4, 21.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914889.pdf (accessed March 2017); Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 22.

⁴² Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 72.

⁴³ Crosswell, *Beetle*, 60.

wasn't he? Ha, ha, ha!"⁴⁴ Wisner took it more personal; he likened the outbursts to "getting whacked around in a squash court."⁴⁵ Smith kept them in a tight leash through close supervision and periodic inspections. One man chosen for this assignment was Smith's wartime comrade General Lucian Truscott who became Smith's eyes and ears. Before leaving for Germany to serve as the CIA senior representative, Truscott looked at Smith and stated, "I'm going to go out there and find out what those weirdos are up to."⁴⁶ It is hard not to imagine the grin on Smith's face when the flamboyant Truscott made the remark. To Smith, Dulles and his gang of "covert warriors" were not simply "weirdos," but also loose cannons which, if left unchecked, would wreak havoc on the Agency and possibly ignite a third world war.

Frank Wisner, in particular, had been responsible for operations getting out of control. Born in Mississippi, the privileged and self-contained Wisner belonged to the southern aristocracy. His family amassed substantial wealth in lumber. After graduating from the University of Virginia, he worked in Wall Street until he enlisted in the Navy. Later in the war he became an OSS agent in Europe working for Dulles and becoming one of his protégés. During Smith's tenure in the CIA, Wisner ran the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) – the department in charge of covert operations.

Wisner zealous faith on covert operation, inflated by his pompous and aggressive nature, caused numerous ignominious failures for the Agency during its efforts to roll back communism in Europe. On one occasion Wisner paid \$400,000 to an ex-Polish air force pilot who had promised to procure a Soviet MiG on the black market, unfortunately, the allure of women and liquor derailed the plan; Wisner never received the promised MiG. In another incident, he

⁴⁴ Ludwell Lee Montague, *General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence* (College Station, PA: Penn State University Press, 1992), 92.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

authorized the recruitment of members of the far-right League of Young Germans. The Young Germans received weapons, explosives and a payment of \$50,000 in exchange for their services in the event of a Red Army invasion. "It turned out, however, that in the event of a Soviet attack, the plan of the Young Germans – many of whom were not young scouts but old SS officers – was to kill about forty top Social Democratic officials."⁴⁷ When the local press published the story, the CIA had to apologize to the German government. Ignoring these lessons, Wisner decided to go ahead with another operation involving a group of Polish nationals known as the *Wolnosc I Niepodlenosc* (Freedom and Independence) – also known by the acronym WIN. The group claimed to be an underground network of five hundred members with more than twenty thousand supporters. Wisner authorized approximately one million dollars to fund the operations of what turned out to be a non-existent network. WIN was an elaborate Soviet deception to entrap dissidents and embarrass the CIA. The Soviets amplified the ignominy by revealing the ruse to the public; making it a *cause célèbre* all across Europe. But the most damaging faux pas involved an Albanian coup attempt. Wisner had directed several covert operations in Albania since 1949 without any real success. The early failures demonstrated the unfeasibility of achieving a regime change, but Wisner refused to cancel the operation. Between 1951 and 1952, Wisner deployed sixty Albanian agents to operate secretly in small teams within the country. Not long after their insertion, Albanian security forces dismantled each team, and killed or captured almost every agent. The Soviet mole and British SIS liaison officer in Washington at the time, Harold "Kim" Philby, tipped off Moscow about the operation, who in turned, provided the details to Albanian counterintelligence – Philby's mannered charm and Wisner's strong Anglophile sentiment facilitated the extraction of sensitive information. In the end, "a series of highly publicized show trials in the capital of Albania made a mockery of the CIA's

⁴⁷ Ibid.

operation.”⁴⁸ Throughout his tenure as DCI, Smith tenaciously tried to “put a lid” on this sloppy and careless work by the Dulles faction.⁴⁹

Shortly before Dulles took the helm at the CIA, some of his “true believers” began to question the effectiveness of covert action and its ability to roll back communism. There had been occasional successes, but more often than not these operations resulted in colossal failures – made evident by Wisner’s gaffes. Frank Lindsay, one of Wisner’s lieutenants in charge of running the European branch of the OPC, sounded the alarm by voicing his dissatisfaction to Wisner and Dulles. The disillusioned Lindsay bluntly told Dulles that the rollback and the covert action approach had been a fiasco. “I began to have doubts about rolling back the Iron Curtain,” Lindsay admitted, “it was peacetime, not wartime. The stuff that had worked against the Germans did not work against the Russians, who seemed impervious. It was time to back off and think this business through.” Lindsay’s statement illuminates the Agency’s cultural blindness and its lack of understanding of the operational environment. Lindsay had realized two important things: one, Europeans had become weary of and exhausted by conflict, and the last thing they wanted was another war; two, the CIA had downplayed the capabilities of Eastern Europe’s counterintelligence services. According to observations made by one British SIS operative, the problem with CIA agents was that they refused to acknowledge the toughness of their opponents. Lindsay’s recommendation to scale back covert action fell on deaf ears; instead, Dulles took the Agency on a more “bold and reckless” path.⁵⁰

When the Eisenhower administration elevated Dulles to the directorship in 1953, he quickly replaced Smith’s cautious and pragmatic covert action approach with one that was overly aggressive and adventurous. Smith had restricted the “appetites and excesses” of the Dulles

⁴⁸ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 65-70.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 66, 70-73 (quotation 71)

faction, but under the new director, boldness and initiative became a "virtue to be prized."⁵¹ As a true believer of clandestine operations, Dulles brought in more flamboyant agents who would bribe and foment plots. During his time as Smith's number two, he supported Wisner's operations and protected him as well when things did not go according to plan. He had to toe the line to avoid flagrant violation of orders, but nevertheless "worked steadily toward the eventual accomplishment of his own purpose in disregard" of Smith's policies.⁵² With Smith out of the picture, Dulles was free to push, without any restrictions, his agenda of high-risk clandestine activities.

⁵¹ Ibid, 86.

⁵² Montague, *General Walter Bedell Smith as Director of Central Intelligence*, 91.

Chapter 2: The Guatemalan Dress Rehearsal

President Eisenhower inherited a dismaying situation in Guatemala. The cancellation of PBFORTUNE and the failed Salama uprising shattered the anti-Communist networks and left the American government with limited options. By August 1953, the purported danger and the necessity for action increased significantly. The National Security Council (NSC) determined that a “continuation of the present trend in Guatemala would ultimately endanger the unity of the Western Hemisphere against Soviet aggression,” and jeopardize the U.S strategic position in the hemisphere.¹ In order to meet this challenge, Eisenhower decided to put to the test a new policy for combating communism around the world: the “New Look” policy. This new strategy “stressed the need for a cheaper, more effective military striking force that would rely more on mobility, nuclear intimidation,” and placed greater “emphasis on covert action.”² The CIA’s fortuitous success in Iran early in his administration validated Eisenhower’s assumption that clandestine operations represented “an inexpensive alternative to military intervention.”³ The president wanted the CIA to reproduce the Iranian success in Guatemala, and the Dulles Faction happily obliged.

Planning PBSUCCESS

Dulles not only wanted to replicate Iran all over again, he wanted to apply the same covert tactics on a “grander scale, over a longer period, and for higher stakes than ever before” in Guatemala.⁴ Disregarding the lessons learned from Iran’s after action review, the Agency kick

¹ “NSC Guatemala,” 19 August 1953, Document 424, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952 – 1954*, Volume IV, The American Republics, eds. N. Stephen Kane and William F. Sandford (Washington: GPO, 1983), 1075. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v04/d424> (accessed March, 2017).

² Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 23.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 25.

started planning for Operation PBSUCCESS – the optimistic name reveals the institutional hubris of the CIA. PBSUCCESS consisted of the following elements: psychological propaganda to isolate the “Communists elements in Guatemala from the Guatemalan people and government,” economic and diplomatic pressure, and paramilitary action. According to CIA planners, the combination of these elements would generate a regime change in Guatemala.⁵

Tracy Barnes became the agent in charge of leading and planning the psychological component of PBSUCCESS. Barnes headed the Political and Psychological Staff in the Directorate of Plans (DDP), and was a charter member of Dulles’ true believers. Like many of Dulles’ protégés, he belonged to the “Eastern Aristocracy,” an Ivy Leaguer who fought as a Jedburgh in the Brittany Peninsula during World War II, and later worked for Dulles as an OSS agent in Switzerland, where he earned Dulles’ trust and respect for secretly getting copies of the diaries of Mussolini’s Foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano. Dulles’ staff called Barnes the “Golden Boy” for his looks and charm.⁶ Many of Barnes’ contemporaries described him as cavalier and a daring thrill-seeker unafraid of consequences. After the war, he practiced law for a brief period before joining the CIA at the request of Frank Wisner. As a Jedburgh, he had defeated a German garrison using psychological warfare techniques. Barnes employed deceptive methods to fool the Germans into believing that they were being attacked by a superior force. In Guatemala, he applied the same approach, but on a grander scale.⁷

⁵ King to Dulles, “Guatemala – General Plan of Action.” 11 September 1953, Document 0000135072, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000135872.pdf (accessed March, 2017); “NSC Guatemala,” 19 August 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952 – 1954*, Volume IV, The American Republics, eds. N. Stephen Kane and William F. Sandford (Washington: GPO, 1983), 1077. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v04/d424> (accessed March, 2017).

⁶ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 79.

⁷ Ibid, 113.

Barnes and his planners designed the psychological warfare plan to achieve four objectives: increase the level of discontent and unrest within the population; incite distrust within the army by promoting falsehoods about an eminent Communist takeover of the army; trigger the erosion of loyalty in both the military and the civil polity; alert the Western Hemisphere of the Communist menace in Guatemala – they hoped to “bring forth sympathy and active or moral support” for the anti-Communist movement. In order to accomplish these objectives, the CIA relied on multiple “psywar activities and black operations using contacts within the press, radio, church, army and other organized elements susceptible to rumor, pamphleteering, poster campaigns, and other subversive actions.”⁸ Radiobroadcast became an integral component of this psywar. The Agency established clandestine radio stations in nearby Honduras and Nicaragua to transmit antigovernment propaganda under the name *La Voz de Liberacion* (The Voice of Liberation). During the dramatic denouement of PBSUCCESS, the Voice of Liberation, as part of a deception, exaggerated the size of Castillo Armas’ feeble force and contributed to the neutralization of Arbenz’ air force.⁹

Analysts agreed that the Guatemalan economy was susceptible to coercion. Both the CIA and State Department coordinated their efforts to target key areas of the economy. The plan called for overt and covert economic warfare methods targeting oil supplies and other shipping and vital exports and imports. At a meeting in Dulles’ office on November 1953, CIA leaders discussed ways in which they could undermine Guatemala’s coffee exports. Dulles tossed around

⁸ King to Dulles, “Guatemala – General Plan of Action,” 11 September 1953, Document 0000135072, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room; “Breakdown of PW Budget for Operation PBSUCCESS,” 23 September 1953, Document 0000924011, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000924011.pdf (accessed March, 2017).

⁹ Richard M. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 86; Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 56.

the idea of using fearmongering to block the import of Guatemalan coffee into the United States. To do this, he contemplated using the “proper agencies in the U.S.” to spread a false narrative about Guatemalan coffee having harmful fungi; thus, barring the shipment of coffee to American ports. His subordinates classified the idea as impractical since coffee buyers were already cognizant of the CIA’s intentions, and because “such action as denying shipment of coffee already paid for would constitute heavy financial losses to these buyers who, lacking proper motivation, might set up a hue and cry, thus injuring the program.”¹⁰ Unable to come up with a feasible course of action, Dulles gave the order to “lay off that coffee idea until further notice.” On the State Department side, Secretary of State J.F. Dulles utilized every mean at his disposal – including fabricated evidence of Guatemalan aggression and subversion – to get the approval for a multilateral agreement on economic action against Guatemala from members of the Organization of American States.¹¹

Politically, the goal was to make Guatemala a pariah state. The U.S ended military aid to Guatemala and increased military support to neighboring nations – Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador signed military aid agreements with the American government. Following the cessation of military aid, the State Department mounted a diplomatic offensive to discredit Guatemala. J.F. Dulles brought the case before the OAS and urged its members to review the “compelling” evidence that “Guatemala constituted a menace to Hemispheric solidarity and the internal

¹⁰ “Contact Report,” 16 November 1953, document 0000924000, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000924000.pdf (accessed March 2017).

¹¹ King to Dulles, “Guatemala – General Plan of Action,” 11 September 1953, Document 0000135072, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room; “Contact Report,” 16 November 1953, document 0000924000, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

security of friendly nations through aggressive Communist subversion.”¹² In a careful written speech, the secretary of state submitted a proposal that justified “appropriate action” against “Communist domination or control of any country” in the Western Hemisphere.¹³ The proposal also recognized Communism not as an indigenous phenomenon, but as something that originated outside of the continent; therefore, “no country in Latin America could voluntarily embrace Communism.”¹⁴ Although a number of nations expressed apprehension, they agreed to sign what became known as the Declaration of Caracas, which stated that “all Marxist revolutionary ideology was necessarily alien to the Western Hemisphere” and any Marxist inclination via revolutionary movements or government policies “would be treated as foreign invasions.”¹⁵ As a result, President Arbenz could not discard the possibility of an external intervention in the internal affairs of his country. The resolution effectively put the Guatemalan government on notice.

The paramilitary action plan turned out to be the most complicated and riskiest component of PBSUCCESS. The plan called for the deployment of a small revolutionary group (300 rebels) across the Honduras-Guatemala border to conduct a swift and climactic attack against Guatemala City, but only after an overt and covert “softening-up.” The other elements of PBSUCCESS – psychological warfare, and economic and political pressure – had to create the ideal conditions for military action. Arbenz and his military staff had to be totally convinced that Castillo Armas commanded a respectable force backed by an American commitment to provide direct support if necessary. Success depended on complete or partial defection of the officer

¹² King to Dulles, “Guatemala – General Plan of Action.” 11 September 1953, Document 0000135072, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

¹³ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 147.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John C. Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 258-259.

corps and support from active civilian resistance groups operating in the capital and in the interior of the country. After launching the assault, these resistance groups would eventually join the rebel force; increasing its size to a level that could match the numerical strength of the army garrison in Guatemala City.¹⁶

The CIA provided the required equipment, training, and financial support for a small rebel army made up of Guatemalan exiles and local citizens. Somoza allowed one of his plantations, *El Tamarindo*, to serve as a training camp for 150 recruits, while others trained at a secret location in Honduras. At these training camps, American military instructors had the daunting task of converting individuals with little or no military experience into soldiers. Based on the assessment of William "Rip" Robertson, a paramilitary case officer who later played a role in the Bay of Pigs, these recruits were "tenth rate," and their leader, Castillo Armas, "might make sergeant in the American army."¹⁷ Tracy Barnes avoided sarcasm and was more direct with his view on the guerrillas; he called Castillo Armas a "bold, but incompetent man," who was neither liked nor respected by his colleagues, and the "rag-tag soldiers" he preferred to call "the hornets."¹⁸ CIA leaders recognized that this "rag-taggle" band, known as the Army of Liberation, "could not have won a battle, let alone a war" against the 5,000-strong Guatemalan army, the strongest and largest army in Central America at the time.¹⁹ Luckily for them, Arbenz never found out.

The Dulles Faction vs. The Circumspect Spies

¹⁶ King to Dulles, "Guatemala – General Plan of Action." 11 September 1953, Document 0000135072, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room; Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 162.

¹⁷ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 115.

¹⁸ Ibid, 116.

¹⁹ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 162.

Similar pessimistic views about PBSUCCESS sparked an internal conflict between the Dulles faction and the more cautious covert strategists. The more pragmatic faction of the Agency – the few remaining Smith-era planners – began raising doubts about the operation and its chances of scoring an Iran-like victory. Unlike the Iran operation, PBSUCCESS would require greater effort and time to develop the essential assets required for the operation. They argued that a paucity of assets in Guatemala hindered the Agency's ability to create a successful covert program. After the Salama debacle, resistance among the landowning elite and clergy had been reduced to a speck by Arbenz's swift dragnet operations. Also, widespread discontent and differences among the social classes engendered an enormous chasm not easily bridged in order to create one unified front capable of political action. Property owners, laborers, professionals, and peasants all shared different goals. Likewise, the circumspect planners began to question the feasibility of eroding the loyalty of the Guatemalan officer corps since not a scintilla of evidence showed that the regular army was susceptible to defection or revolt. One of the leading critics was the chief of the Psychological and Paramilitary Operations Branch in the DDP, Hans Tofte. A veteran spy with combat experience in WWII and Korea, Tofte had joined the CIA as soon as it was established, and served as a troubleshooter for Bedell Smith during his directorship.²⁰

Tofte pulled no punches when evaluating the overall concept of the operation. In one of his CIA reports, the veteran Tofte characterized PBSUCCESS as "impracticable." His greatest concern involved the paramilitary action plan, especially the Army of Liberation. He considered Castillo Armas' position weak, and labeled the available assets outside of Guatemala as "negligible," adding that success depended solely on expected popular support. However, "there is no evidence that such popular support would be forthcoming," Tofte wrote. "There are no

²⁰ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 27-28.

actual proofs of any effective covert mechanism of any consequence inside the target country.”²¹ Castillo Armas and his Army of Liberation had no chance of succeeding against a Guatemalan army that, according to NIE-84, had the capability of defeating a combined army formed by its three neighboring countries.²² State Department officials sided with Tofte during a meeting where planners briefed the concept of the plan to the head of Middle American Affairs Raymond Leddy. The diplomat came out of the meeting unconvinced. Leddy admitted that “prospects do not appear very bright,” suggesting that “some organizational work and some fundamental changes in the situation will have to occur” before any uprising could succeed.²³ The plan grossly underestimated Arbenz’ government, and overestimated the dissident movement and its capabilities.

These concerns met stiff opposition from the Dulles faction. They pushed back on the criticism by highlighting the Agency’s proven tactics. Wisner and others referenced the operation in Iran as a powerful example of how the same model generated positive results. Like the TPAJAX plan, PBSUCCESS provided Agency planners the same flexibility to make adjustments as the operation unfolded. “Actually, the plan is stated in such broad terms that it is not possible to know exactly what it contemplates, particularly in the later phases,” Wisner commented to DCI Dulles. “However, I do not regard this as a particular drawback,” argued Wisner, “since a vastly-detailed plan prepared at this time would have to be modified in any case.” Having no qualms about the outcome of PBSUCCESS, the Dulles faction pushed for its approval, even when State Department officials sided with the non-Dulles faction. In a

²¹ “Impressions of PBFORTUNE,” 04 September 1953, Document 0000924022, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

²² NIE 84, “Probably Developments in Guatemala,” 8 May 1953, Document 0000914889, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, 4.

²³ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 29.

memorandum to the director, Wisner urged DCI Dulles to “approve it” and to immediately authorize the execution of the first phase of planning.²⁴

The “small civil war” among CIA strategists reached its climatic denouement when Wisner and Dulles decided to remove Colonel J.C King from the project. The Chief of the Western Hemisphere Division had been nominally in charge of the operation. A former FBI agent, King joined the CIA immediately after the FBI transferred responsibilities of intelligence activities in Latin America to the Agency.²⁵ King represented the opposite of what DCI Dulles wanted in his agents. He epitomized the vintage FBI approach, and was hostile to the philosophy of covert action. Belonging to the non-believer camp, King began to butt heads with the project coordinator Albert Haney, a true believer. Haney personified Dulles’ image of an ideal agent: young, bold, adventurous, and enthusiastic about covert action. As a subordinate to King, Haney ruffled King’s feathers by being too aggressive and ignoring orders to “slow down and pursue a more cautious approach.”²⁶ King complained that Haney was taking excessive risks. “He is trying to start a Korean War right at our doorstep,” King told Wisner.²⁷ On the other hand, King’s constant meddling irritated Haney. Haney believed that the Agency was divided against itself.²⁸ In order to reduce tensions, Wisner began taking a more direct role in the operation, but King and Wisner started having issues as well over how to proceed with the operation. As a result, Dulles sidelined King for the rest of the operation. King’s removal sent a clear message to those refusing to toe the line. The bickering and back-and-forth between King and Haney

²⁴ Ibid; quotations from “Program for PBSUCCESS,” 16 November 1953, Document 0000923999, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000923999.pdf (accessed March 2017).

²⁵ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 83.

²⁶ Ibid, 84.

²⁷ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 117.

²⁸ Ibid.

embodied the irreconcilable conflicts and ideological divide that existed between the true believers and the circumspect camp.

To avoid further problems, Dulles decided to give exclusive control of PBSUCCESS to Wisner; officially making it an autonomous operation. No other directorates in the Agency would take part in or support the operation. For example, the Deputy Director for Intelligence (DDI) was never briefed on the operation, and the "Guatemala Station excluded references to PBSUCCESS in its reports to the DDI."²⁹ Wisner gave the operation a separate chain of command, communications facility, logistics, and funds.³⁰ Of those who remained in the project, a large majority belonged to the Dulles faction, while the rest understood that dissenting opinions were no longer welcome.

Costly Mistakes

By March 1954, Barnes and his staff decided to create a pirate air force as another psychological weapon of intimidation against Arbenz. Since the Guatemalan Air Force posed no significant threat, Barnes wanted to use the pirate air force to control the skies and create panic by bombing the capital.³¹ Wisner emphatically opposed the idea, claiming that having a CIA-backed rebel air force could blow the operation's cover and make it harder for the American government to deny its involvement.³² Wisner was correct with his assumptions, but Barnes won the argument. The CIA acquired and sent a dozen aircraft – three C-47 cargo planes, six F-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers, one P-38 Lightning fighter, one Cessna 180, and one Cessna 140 – to an airstrip in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.³³ The challenge was finding suitable pilots without

²⁹ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 29.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 113.

³² Ibid, 118.

³³ Sherwood to Lincoln, 05 June 1954, Document 0000920871, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

compromising the secrecy of the operation. Barnes and his staff needed a plausible cover story in the event that “mechanical difficulties or political developments should lead to the confiscation of the aircraft and equipment, and/or the internment of the pilots.”³⁴ The issue with the pilots was not the cover story, but Barnes’ hiring practices. The staff at the Psychological and Political branch labeled Barnes’ hiring techniques as lousy and bottom-line incompetent. “Tracy was very lax on security,” reported an aide who helped him locate and recruit the air crews. The same aide stated that Barnes was in such a hurry to find pilots that he proceeded to hire them without the required background checks, which according to the aide, was a flagrant violation of the Agency’s standard operating procedures. Wisner became incensed when he found out about Barnes’ lackadaisical style. He sharply reprimanded the staff and called the recruitment process “stupid” and “ridiculous” for obvious reasons; the Agency was concerned about leaks and blown cover. Nevertheless, the verbal reprimand did little to prevent the hiring of air crews that turned out to be nutcases. This same carelessness and sloppy work continued with unprecedented frequency throughout the operation.³⁵

On 20 February 1954, the Lincoln Station (CIA field office in Guatemala) alerted the CIA headquarters in Washington about a serious compromise of communication and project security due to the discovery of unsecured sensitive information at an apartment in Guatemala City. The sensitive documents were left behind by a field agent who had returned to Washington. Realizing the serious violation of security protocols, the agent unsuccessfully attempted to have

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000920871.pdf (accessed March 2017); Lincoln to Sherwood, 27 March 1954, Document 0000136044, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000136044.pdf (accessed March 2017).

³⁴ Chief, WHD to Lincoln, “Operational Air Support Plan,” 05 March 1954, Document 0000928363, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000928363.pdf (accessed March 2017).

³⁵ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 114.

the documents deliver to him without the Agency's knowledge. The documents contained sensitive text with operational cryptonyms and pseudonyms. The agent who made the discovery immediately contacted the field office when he realized that a "serious exposure of Agency cryptonyms and PBSUCCESS organizational methods and procedures had been revealed to at least two known unauthorized persons and probably an indeterminable number of others."³⁶

After a full investigation into the impact of the breach, investigators discovered that an unknown number of people found out that a powerful, well organized, official United States organization was backing the Castillo Armas group; that some of the documents may have gotten into the hands of some of Castillo Armas' men, and if so, "it could well be that any or all of the information may have gotten into the hands of the Guatemalan government through agents in the Castillo Armas organization; and that information may have been passed to any one of a number of other intelligence services."³⁷ The agent responsible for the breach went through a thorough interrogation, and deemed "completely unreliable," but the damage had been done. According to CIA officials, the incident painfully compromised PBSUCCESS "to a degree heretofore considered beyond the realm of possibility, and further, a large amount of information" likely fell into the lap of President Arbenz.³⁸

Security leaks were a real problem for Castillo Armas and his associates as well. Agency sources and methods confirmed the pervasiveness of leaks among the rank-and-file of the guerrillas and among Castillo Armas' closest associates. Failed polygraph tests provided incontrovertible evidence that many of these men, including Castillo Armas' closest assistant,

³⁶ "Compromise of Cable Traffic – PBSUCCESS," 20 February 1954, Document 0000135857, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000135857.pdf (accessed March 2017).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Raul Sierra, continuously provided conclusive evidence of the American plot to the Guatemalan government; a reality that Castillo Armas often refused to believe.³⁹ At one point during the operation a Nicaraguan immigration officer by the name of Duarte, who worked for the rebel group and had knowledge of the black flights and possibly the paramilitary training sites, requested political asylum at the Guatemalan embassy in Managua.⁴⁰ Undeniably, these types of incidents widened Guatemala's knowledge of PBSUCCESS. All the infractions and carelessness by Castillo Armas' group and his associates raised alarming concerns among field agents. In a cable to the director, the Lincoln Station warned that all "security violations and loose talk by local CALLIGERIS group must cease soonest or irreparable damage will ensue."⁴¹ Little did they know that the damage had already been done. It became evident to the CIA by late January 1954 that the Guatemalan government had explicit knowledge of a U.S-sponsored covert operation.

The perfidious involvement of the American government in the internal affairs of Guatemala triggered an aggressive and very damaging surveillance campaign by the Guatemalan intelligence services. Using their own intelligence estimates, Guatemalan agents deployed to known areas of interest inside and outside of the country to collect more information on the plot. In one particular incident, a CIA communications technician discovered and confronted two unidentified individuals conducting active surveillance of a sensitive CIA location known as

³⁹ Jacob D. Esterline, "Items for Inclusion in CE Report," 22 April 1954, Document 0000916210, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000916210.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴⁰ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 42.

⁴¹ Cable, Lincoln to Director, 26 January 1954, Document 0000914008, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914008.pdf (accessed March 2017).

“site B.”⁴² Similarly, in late April the Agency discovered wiretaps in both American embassies in Guatemala and Honduras. Navy counterintelligence officials found electronic bugs and microphones in the residence and offices of both ambassadors.⁴³ The most devastating blow came from a Guatemalan double agent named Jorge Isaac Delgado. According to the Agency in-house history, Delgado was a Panamanian diplomat, who for unclear reasons, approached an aide to President Arbenz and offered his services as an informer. At the time, Delgado enjoyed the trust of CIA field agents and acted as a courier for Castillo Armas and his contacts in Mexico.⁴⁴ He gave Arbenz “intimate knowledge” of training bases and a “fairly accurate concept of the *modus operandi* of PBSUCCESS.”⁴⁵ Aside from revealing everything about the paramilitary training in Honduras and Nicaragua, including Somoza’s involvement in the operation, Delgado also supplied a plethora of secret documents ranging from CIA cables to personal letters from Somoza and Castillo Armas.⁴⁶ The damage was so severe, that in order to mitigate the impact of Delgado’s work, the CIA created a plan called “Counter-Attack Against Further Guatemalan Revelations of CIA Plans Against Guatemala.”⁴⁷ They need not have bothered. By the end of

⁴² Cable, Lincoln to Director, 27 February 1954, Document 0000135975, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000135975.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴³ “Summary of Important Findings,” April 1954, Document 0000916359, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000916359.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴⁴ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴⁶ Contact Report, 29 January 1954, Document 0000913973, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000913973.pdf (accessed March 2017); “Situation Report – PBSUCCESS, for the period 16-22 February 1954,” 23 February 1954, Document 0000913242, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000913242.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴⁷ “Counterattack Against Further Guatemalan Revelations of CIA Plans Against Guatemala,” 10 February 1954, Document 0000913557, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000913557.pdf (accessed March 2017).

spring 1954, the Guatemalan government was well informed on PBSUCCESS. As the Guatemalan military attaché in Washington told an old acquaintance working for the CIA: “we have knowledge that exiled Guatemalans residing in Honduras are planning a revolutionary movement against Guatemala. This invasion, which will come through Ocotepeque [township on the Guatemala-Honduras border], will be a fiasco, as the leaders of this planned revolt know.”⁴⁸

The Guatemalan government had collected enough compelling evidence to expose the plot and cause irreparable damage to American prestige, but instead they decided on letting the operation proceed undisturbed in order to continue documenting the evidence for an eventual presentation to the OAS.⁴⁹ In the meantime, Arbenz followed Mossadeq’s footsteps in ordering the largest crackdown on the opposition since the Salama uprising. Anyone under suspicion of conspiracy against the government was arrested by security forces. In a short time span of two weeks, the police arrested four hundred and eighty dissenters and executed approximately seventy ringleaders, including counter-revolutionary leaders affiliated with Castillo Armas’ group – the director of the Anti-Communist *Radio Ciro*s, Roberto Castillo Sinibaldi, and the editor of the anti-Communist newssheet *La Oposicion*, Jose Maria Guzman.⁵⁰ Towards the end of June the CIA’s network of spies had suffered such severe losses that Barnes recommended to

⁴⁸ Operational Intelligence, “JUGATION I/Guatemalan Military Attaché Conversations,” 12 April 1954, Document 0000916472, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000916472.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁴⁹ Jacob D. Esterline, “Items for Inclusion in CE Report, 22 April 1954, Document 0000916210, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

⁵⁰ Cable, “Arrested Conspirators,” 28 January 1954, Document 0000913989, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000913989.pdf (accessed March 2017).

Wisner a complete overhaul of the anti-Arbenz movement. The crackdown continued until the very end of PBSUCCESS.⁵¹

The breaches in operational security, along with the evisceration of the opposition by the Guatemalan security forces, produced an atmosphere of dismay within the CIA. The Dulles faction's optimism faded at lightning speed. Richard Bissell, who was the special assistant to Dulles and handled logistics for the operation, recalled how everyone was on the brink of having a nervous breakdown. "We were all of us at our wits' end," recalled Bissell.⁵² Everyone started giving serious thought to the prospect of cancelling the operation. To many, it felt like Iran all over again. Wisner, who already was exuding signs of an incipient mania, was hit the hardest by the unsavory situation. "His attitude appeared to be almost fatalistic," wrote Bissell in his memoirs.⁵³ Wisner realized that plausible deniability turned into fantasy and success became unattainable. He was convinced that "several categories of people – hostile, friendly, and 'neutral' – either know or suspect or believe that the United States is directly behind this one and, assuming that it proceeds to a conclusion, would be able to tell a very convincing story."⁵⁴ Despite the ominous outlook, it was too late to turn back; the operation had reached a point of no return. Wisner "was amenable to putting the actors in motion and then letting the cards fall as they might" because killing off the operation would send the wrong message to enemies and friends, and would "reassure the regime and strengthen its position," as well as legitimize the "strength and rectitude of Arbenz."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Cable, Lincoln to Director, 24 January 1954, Document 0000914067, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000914067.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁵² Ibid, 120.

⁵³ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 87.

⁵⁴ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 42.

⁵⁵ "Disadvantages and Damages Resulting from a Decision to Discontinue or Substantially Modify PBSUCCESS," 15 April 1954, Document 0000923791, Declassified documents on Guatemala

The Department of State, alarmed by the situation, disagreed with the CIA's decision to proceed, and requested the postponement of the operation until top level officials (the Dulles brothers) had the opportunity to review the matter.⁵⁶ The Dulles brothers decided to continue the operation. Days later President Eisenhower looked at DCI Dulles and said, "commit the flag," effectively launching PBSUCCESS. The president launched the operation unaware of the sad state of affairs.

Crossing the Border

On June 18, the Army of Liberation crossed the Guatemalan border from Honduras and their small pirate air force went into action. It did not take long – as the Guatemalan military attaché prophetically stated – for the whole thing to turn into a fiasco. As soon as Castillo Armas and his band of four hundred and eighty rebels set foot in Guatemalan territory, a young Guatemalan lieutenant with a platoon of thirty soldiers obliterated one of the rebel columns. Out of a total of one hundred and twenty-two rebels, only thirty survived the onslaught. Another column of sixty rebels did not even make it to the border; the Salvadoran border police detained them after discovering their weapons cache. The biggest setback came when the largest column (198 rebels), responsible for attacking the port city of Puerto Barrios, suffered a colossal defeat at the hands of a hybrid force of local policemen and armed dock workers. Meanwhile, Castillo Armas stayed within three miles of the border with one hundred rebels frantically calling for air support.⁵⁷

chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000923791.pdf (accessed March 2017); Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 87.

⁵⁶ Esterline to Wisner, "Postponement of PBSUCCESS at the Request of Department of State," 30 April 1954, Document 0000916070, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000916070.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁵⁷ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 65, 67-69.

On the air force side, what unfolded was a tragicomedy. The bombing method was ineffective. The “bombs” – Coke bottles full of gasoline – were thrown haphazardly out of the windows of Cessna planes without any accuracy, causing no real damage and intimidating no one. To make matters worse, two planes were lost in the first day of the operation; one plane was shot down by small-arms fire and another ran out of gas, crash-landing over the border in Mexico. Another risible episode involved the erroneous bombing of an American evangelical church. One of the rebel pilots mistakenly bombed the church thinking it was a government radio station.⁵⁸ The only direct hit came when a P-38 Lightning dropped two five hundred-pound bombs on a British cargo ship insured by the powerful Lloyd’s of London.⁵⁹ As a result of the pilot’s accuracy, the American government had to pay one million dollars to Her Majesty’s Government. The CIA field office in Guatemala characterized the performance as “pathetic.”⁶⁰ Overall, senior military officials in the Pentagon attributed the rapid demise of the *liberacionistas* to “two serious blunders:” the rebel force “struck too soon,” and “their bombing planes bombed the wrong targets.”⁶¹ After just two days the entire operation was headed towards utter failure. The core of the Guatemalan army remained neutral, the citizens stayed at home in silent acquiescence, and Castillo Armas contemplated returning to Honduras.

For the CIA, it felt like déjà vu all over again; another reminder of the Iran experience. Sorrow and despair filled the air as agents tried to figure out how to salvage what they perceived as unsalvageable. Agency officials, including Bissell, were not optimistic about the prospects for

⁵⁸ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 119.

⁵⁹ Grayston Lynch, *Decision for Disaster: Betrayal at the Bay of Pigs* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1998), 50.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 119.

⁶¹ Wisner to General (deleted), 22 June 1954, Document 0000921395, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room.

https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000921395.pdf (March 2017).

PBSUCCESS, putting the odds at less than even.⁶² Wisner turned edgy again, unsure of what to do, concerned more than ever with plausible deniability. He kept frantically accosting subordinates with questions. Dulles remained calm and collected as the signs of imminent failure became clearer. On 20 June, two days after launching the operation, he drafted a memorandum for the president outlining the ambiguity of success:

The outcome of the efforts to overthrow the regime of President Arbenz of Guatemala remains very much in doubt. The controlling factor in the situation is still considered to be the position of the Guatemalan armed forces, and thus far this group has not given any clear indication of whether it will move, and if so, in which way. If the Guatemalan army should move within the next few days against the Arbenz regime, it is considered to have the capacity to overthrow it. On the other hand, if it remains loyal and if most of the military elements commit themselves to vigorous action against the forces of Castillo Armas the latter will be defeated and a probability of uprising from among other elements of the population is considered highly unlikely.⁶³

Dulles estimated that if the situation did not improve in the next twenty-four hours, the operation was unlikely to succeed. As the CIA contemplated throwing in the towel, Arbenz made a crucial mistake.

Arbenz and his government suffered from paralysis by analysis. The vast amount of irrefutable evidence collected by the Guatemalan government on American involvement in the plot to overthrow the regime triggered the flawed assumption that the Americans intended to deploy ground troops. Arbenz was utterly convinced that Castillo Armas' invasion was part of a larger American plan for direct intervention. Based on the CIA in-house history, Arbenz and his army chief of staff, Carlos Enrique Diaz, viewed the quick defeat of the rebels as an unwise strategy because it could have triggered the deployment of American ground troops. Therefore, their strategy consisted of letting the *liberacionistas* advance unopposed into the interior of the

⁶² Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 122.

⁶³ Dulles to Eisenhower, "The Situation in Guatemala," 20 June 1954, Document 0000921547, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000921547.pdf (accessed March 2017).

country before delivering the final blow at the outskirts of the provincial town of Zacapa. By June 19, the government had deployed a large contingent of troops to Zacapa, where they waited for the *liberacionistas*. But like their president, these soldiers feared a U.S intervention. While they waited in Zacapa, officers and soldiers alike “ruminated on the likely consequences of defeating Castillo Armas, murmuring that Marines might already be landing in Honduras.”⁶⁴

The rumors about the army’s unwillingness to fight reached the presidential palace almost as soon as the troops arrived in Zacapa, and Arbenz grew restless because the promised decisive blow failed to materialize. As suspicions about the army’s loyalty mounted, the acting secretary general, Alvaro Monzon, sent an aide to Zacapa to evaluate the situation and attitude of the army. Two days later the aide confirmed the rumors. The officers were disheartened, afraid, and reluctant to fight. Refusing to believe the report, Arbenz sent a trusted military officer to reexamine the situation in Zacapa. The officer returned with the same report and an unsavory message: “*Centenario*, the high command asked me to tell you that you must resign. The situation is hopeless. The officers don’t want to fight. They think that the Americans are threatening Guatemala just because of you and your Communist friends. If you don’t resign, the army will march on the capital to depose you. They have already begun to arrest peasants.” On that same day, the town of Chiquimula – guarded by several hundred soldiers under the command of a known Arbenz loyalist – surrendered to Castillo Armas without firing a single shot.⁶⁵

What exactly transpired at Zacapa remains unclear, but according to Piero Gleijeses, the army officers fomented the mutiny for personal gain, and not because they supported Castillo Armas. In fact, many of them disliked the rebel leader. Some officers resented Armas’

⁶⁴ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 73.

⁶⁵ Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 333-334 (quotation 333).

treacherous invasion and others liked or respected Arbenz and wanted to castigate Castillo Armas for his actions. Regardless, the army caved in not because of the CIA-backed rebel force or the CIA's psywar campaign and small pirate air force, but because of fear of a direct American intervention. Arbenz managed to channel his personal qualms to the army. "Fear defeated them," explained a Guatemalan officer, "they were terrorized by the idea that the United States was looming behind Castillo Armas."⁶⁶ The American military attaché at the time agreed. "The officers were definitely afraid of the possibility of U.S intervention against Arbenz and with good reason," stated the American officer, "that fear was the stabilizing influence that kept them from coming to Arbenz' support when the chips were down."⁶⁷ Without options and in utter despair, Arbenz made the ruinous decision to distribute weapons among his coalition of supporters, including the Communist PGT. The army's conservative officer corps, whose loyalty had dissipated, disagreed with Arbenz' decision. On the fateful day of 27 June 1954, President Arbenz took to the airwaves with an important message for the nation: "After thinking it over, I have taken a great decision of great importance for our country. I have decided to quit power, to turn the executive over to Carlos Enrique Diaz, Chief of the Armed Forces."⁶⁸

Arbenz' resignation caught everyone in the CIA by surprise. It was Iran all over again; snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. Inside the war room cheers and glasses were raised in celebration. The Dulles Boys were giddy; the spymasters felt positively "Rooseveltian," exclaiming "Bully! Bully! We did it!"⁶⁹ Barnes received much of the credit for the success. The consensus was that Barnes' Psychological and Political branch had done a remarkable job.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 338.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Arbenz' Speech Delivered at 0310-0320 EST," 27 June 1954, Document 0000920952, Declassified documents on Guatemala chronicling the 1954 coup, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room. https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000920952.pdf (accessed March 2017).

⁶⁹ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 122.

Wisner also became the recipient of praise as well. Agents credited his "persistence and attention to detail" as a positive influence.⁷⁰

Similar to Iran, the victory engendered amnesia and exaggerated lore. Everyone forgot about the self-inflicted wounds that derailed the operation: carelessness, security breaches, inter-Agency fighting, failure to understand the operational environment, botched assignments, and miscommunications. While listening to a post-operation rehearsal brief for the president, Dulles stopped the briefer midway, looked at him and exclaimed, "I have never heard such crap."⁷¹ Exaggerated lore was expected, especially since Iran and Guatemala validated the CIA's folklore of the "hapless Third World stooge being supported at the critical moment by a cool and all-knowing CIA."⁷²

In the aftermath of Guatemala, participants like Richard Bissell, propagated the debatable narrative that "Arbenz lost his nerve" as a result of the Agency's aggressive psywar campaign and air attacks, but as we have seen, that was not the case. The Agency's own in-house history agrees that "Arbenz was deposed in a military coup, and neither the radio nor the air attacks had much to do with it."⁷³ The CIA's experiences – along with the tales of victory that followed – in Iran and Guatemala bred dangerous illusions. From these experiences, CIA operatives learned how "easy" it was to overthrow a Central American government without realizing that the Guatemala job had been another fiasco. The stage for the Bay of Pigs was set.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 124.

⁷² Ibid, 125.

⁷³ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 75.

Chapter 3: "Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime"

The Cuban economy in the 1950s was unlike any other in Central and Latin America. Throughout this decade, American capital ensured steady economic growth and stability in the island. American businesses controlled key sectors of the economy – public services, banking, oil, imports, sugar production, and large portions of the arable land. The standard of living in the island nation was one of the highest in the Western Hemisphere. The number of Cuban landholders had increased since the end of WWII, and the sophisticated and internationally connected middle class made up one-fourth to one-third of the population. Havana, with its European baroque architecture, exotic nightclubs, and gambling casinos, attracted a sea of tourists every year. The city became the media capital of Latin America and received the moniker "Paris of the Caribbean."¹ The island became a real Caribbean paradise for many Americans and Cubans alike, but it came at a cost.²

Cuba's economic growth at the time had created a precipice of wealth inequality. While the rich became richer, the number of illiterate, dirt poor *guajiros* (peasants) increased. Political corruption, commonplace in Cuba, worsened the problem of social and economic inequality. Fulgencio Batista – the former sergeant and U.S.-backed right-wing dictator who ruled the island with an iron fist from 1952 to 1958 – was the embodiment of corruption. Batista exploited his political power and influence for personal enrichment. For a hefty fee, he allowed American gangsters to control the Cuban underworld – the casinos, drug trafficking, and brothels all were controlled by mobsters. Many Cubans felt that Batista's disruption of the constitutional order,

¹ Paula Harper, "Cuba Connections: Key West-Tampa-Miami, 1870 to 1945," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 22 (1996): 278-291.

² Walter LaFeber, *America in the Cold War: Twenty Years of Revolutions and Response, 1947-1967* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969), 128; Victor Andres Triay, *Bay of Pigs: An Oral History of Brigade 2506* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 1; Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

along with his dictatorial policies and corruption, had prevented essential economic and social reforms in the country. By the mid-1950s, frustration and animosity towards the dictator turned into armed opposition. Numerous opposition groups attempted to overthrow the regime, but only the 26th of July Movement, the largest and most popular, succeeded. Led by its dynamic leader, Fidel Castro, the group fought the Batista regime for three years in the cities and mountains of Cuba. Relying on guerrilla warfare and urban sabotage, the bearded group of rebels managed to break the will of Batista's army. Left without an army, Batista and his many lackeys fled the island.³

On New Year's Day 1959, the city of Havana exploded with jubilation upon hearing the news of Batista's departure; horns sounded, shots rang out, and people took to the streets singing, dancing, and cheering. All over the city people placed the black-and-red flags of the 26th of July Movement on windows and doors waiting for the triumphant arrival of Fidel Castro and his *barbudos* (bearded ones). They traveled for seven days along Cuba's central highway, stopping at every major provincial city to celebrate their victory. Thousands came out waving flags, throwing flowers, and greeting the *barbudos*. Once the rebels arrived in Havana, they continued "past the crowds along the Malecon sea drive, past the decorated Morro Castle, past warships firing a welcoming salute," and into the city's biggest military base, Camp Columbia.⁴ Meanwhile, the American government witnessed the event with great skepticism. Fidel Castro had become an enigma for policymakers: "What is Fidel Castro? By whom is he controlled? What does he represent? Is he or is he not, a Communist?"⁵ These were the questions many in

³ Triay, *Bay of Pigs*, 1-2; Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 10.

⁴ Haynes Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs: The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1964), 17.

⁵ Jack B. Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960* (CIA Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation, 1979), 2. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/bop-vol3.pdf> (accessed August, 2016).

the U.S government, especially in the CIA, wanted answered as soon as possible. The answers came sooner than expected.⁶

Dealing with Castro

The CIA had kept an eye on Castro's political activism since 1948. Early CIA files characterized him as simply a young and restless troublemaker. "One of the young 'student leaders' in Cuba, who manages to get himself involved in many things that do not concern him," stated one CIA report. Other reports from Batista's Military Intelligence Services (SIM) branded him as a communist, but the American government dismissed the claim as nothing more than baseless allegations and accusations. According to American diplomats in Cuba, the SIM's reporting embodied Batista's slanted effort to make Castro a "rojo." However, concern for and interest in Castro's political ideology increased exponentially with the outbreak of the insurrection against Batista. Reports from the *Sierra Maestra* indicated that the rebel force had communist leaders. Two of Fidel Castro's deputies, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Raul Castro (Fidel's brother), were identified as self-declared communists. Agents who infiltrated the rebel group found "definite communist overtones," but in terms of their leader Fidel Castro – who emphatically denied being a communist and gave assurances of democratic elections and fundamental freedoms – the evidence was less conclusive. The mixed signals made it difficult to assess Castro's political ideology. When the bearded guerrillas descended from the mountains for their triumphant march towards Havana, the CIA believed that *El Caballo** (The Horse) was neither Communist nor anti-Communist.⁷

⁶ Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs*, 17.

⁷ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 1-2, 5-7, 27 (quotations 1 & 7); Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 10; Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs*, 24.

As soon as Castro took power, he did what President Arbenz had done in Guatemala: he nominated several Communists to powerful, high-level positions and launched radical reforms. But unlike Arbenz, he suspended basic legal rights and conducted mass executions of “enemies” of the revolution. The persecution against former members of Batista’s military turned into a purge. In one incident, forty-four ex-Batista air force pilots stood before a tribunal accused of committing war crimes, but when the court acquitted the pilots for lack of evidence, Castro reversed the ruling and had the pilots imprisoned. Although Castro’s decision met sharp criticism, the indiscriminate persecution of “counter-revolutionaries” – anyone who opposed the ideas of the revolution, showed dissent, or had supported the Batista regime – persisted. When Huber Matos – one of Castro’s top commanders and military governor of the province of Camaguey – submitted his resignation in protest for the revolution’s Communist undertones, Castro sentenced him to twenty years in prison. Next came the curtailment of freedom of the press, the abolition of non-Castro political movements, and an overt campaign to suspend elections. The promises of free elections evolved into the campaign slogan: “*Elecciones para que?*” (elections, for what?) It took little time for the Eisenhower administration to realize that Cuba was veering towards Communism, turning into another Guatemala.⁸

The straw that broke the camel’s back in U.S.-Cuba relations was Fidel Castro’s attack on American economic interests in the island, his hysterical anti-American tirades, and Cuba’s alliance with the Soviet Union. Castro made the radical decision to nationalize all American-owned businesses without offering monetary compensation in return. Consequently, he initiated a “wide-ranging agrarian reform program financed in part by the property of American-

⁸ Triay, *Bay of Pigs*, 2-3 (quotation 3).

* The sobriquet the Cuban population gave Fidel Castro when he descended from the mountains – the romantic, quixotic, legendary liberator from the hills.

controlled firms in Cuba which he seized.”⁹ For the American government, the agrarian reform underscored the crude reality that Castro’s revolution was turning into a watermelon: the more you sliced it, the redder it got.¹⁰ Along with the confiscation of American property came the bitter anti-American diatribes and disturbing ties with the Soviet Union. Using inflammatory language, Castro boldly declared the end of American domination over Cuba; demanding the return of the Guantanamo naval base and declaring that the Monroe doctrine was dead. The visit of the Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan to Havana in the summer of 1960, followed by Raul Castro’s visit to Moscow, produced the Soviet-Cuban pact, which guaranteed arms to Cuba in exchange for sugar.¹¹

In late spring 1959, Vice-President Richard Nixon and Fidel Castro met in Washington. After a three-hour meeting, Nixon’s appraisal of Castro proved prophetic. Aside from labeling Castro as a great leader with “indefinable qualities,” he concluded that the Cuban *jefe* would become a “great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs.”¹² Although Castro tried to convince Nixon that “he was not a Communist and that his policies had the support of the great majority of the Cuban people,” the vice-president left the meeting with serious doubts.¹³ “He is either incredibly naïve about communism or under Communist discipline – my guess is the former,” said Nixon.¹⁴ Nixon was hopeful that the Eisenhower administration could still guide the Cuban leader away from the tentacles of communism. In his memorandum of the conversation with Castro, Nixon suggested that the

⁹ LaFeber, *America in the Cold War*, 127.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹ Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 11; Triay, *Bay of Pigs*, 3.

¹² Richard Nixon, “Rough Draft of Summary of Conversation Between the Vice President and Fidel Castro,” 25 April 1959, 5, George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/bayofpigs/19590425.pdf> (accessed August 16, 2016).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

administration would need to "at least try to orient him in the right direction."¹⁵ The Americans were counting on an aggressive, non-violent approach to the Cuban problem. After all, Cuba's economy depended on the American market and its capital.

Nixon's suggestion seemed to have made an impact on policymakers because after his appraisal of Castro the CIA issued a new Related Mission Directive (RMD) on Cuba. All operations had to be "carried out on the assumptions that the revolutionary government is basically non-Communist, with legitimate reform goals that deserve U.S respect and support."¹⁶ The CIA needed to support government efforts to reach a rapprochement with the revolutionary government of Cuba unless circumstances dictated otherwise. "If it should be established that the Cuban government is Communist-led or Communist-dominated, or if that government cannot be swayed from adopting measures which intentionally or unintentionally accomplish Communist objectives," stated the RMD policy, "the question of direct attacks against Castro will be re-examined."¹⁷ Unless there was a major policy change approved by top government officials, the Agency could not engage in covert action against the government of Cuba.

The Dulles Faction Jumps into Action

The new directive did not dissuade Allen Dulles and his covert action enthusiasts from developing an anti-Castro program. The experiences of Iran and Guatemala skewed their view of the Castro government. To them, Castro represented a combination of Mossadeq and Arbenz, poised to make Cuba a Communist state right under the nose of the United States. The only solution to prevent this from happening was to remove Castro from power. By 8 January 1960, Dulles directed Richard Bissell, the new Deputy Director for Plans (DDP), to organize a special

¹⁵ Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 11.

¹⁶ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 28.

¹⁷ Ibid.

task force to deal with the Cuban problem.¹⁸ Two weeks later Bissell created what became known as Branch 4 of the Western Hemisphere (WH/4); and as Frank Wisner had done for Operation PBSUCCESS, Bissell assumed exclusive control of the project, neither seeking nor receiving aid from other departments within the Agency. The similarities between the Guatemalan and the Cuban operation were striking. Once again, Robert Amory, Deputy Director for Intelligence (DDI), was kept out of the loop as all intelligence reports went directly to WH/4 instead of the DDI. Bissell intentionally segregated the project from all other activities, assigning it a separate chain of command, logistical support, and even its own operational headquarters. Just like PBSUCCESS had been Wisner's baby, the Cuban operation became Bissell's project.¹⁹

Respected and deferred to, the "Grotties" (for graduates of the nation's most exclusive prep school, Groton: the vital steppingstone for Eastern Establishment-types leading to Harvard and Yale, then Wall Street and government service) could hardly be blamed for feelings of omnipotence; they had defied the odds in Iran and Guatemala. The success of TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS validated the value of covert action, but also engendered a pernicious rift between the "true believers" and the Agency's core of "prudent spies." In Guatemala, the decision to push aside the more cautious agents in order to give the Dulles faction a free hand in the operation intensified the animosity between the two groups. Bissell followed the same approach for the Cuban project; he wanted to keep the detractors out. Colonel J.C King became one of the first people confined to the outer edges of the anti-Castro operation. Although he was in line to head the project – King was the chief of the Western Hemisphere division – and possessed invaluable expertise, Bissell excluded him, giving the job to fellow covert enthusiast Jack Esterline. "J.C. was not effective enough to handle this kind of very fast moving, quite large scale, quite

¹⁸ Triay, *Bay of Pigs*, 7.

¹⁹ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 32.

complex, paramilitary operation,” Bissell admitted in the CIA’s in-house history.²⁰ Bissell was somewhat disingenuous in his remarks about King. The real reason behind King’s exclusion was his own view on covert action and rift with the project coordinator of PBSUCCESS Albert Haney. King had been the central figure in the short-lived conflict between the believers and non-believers of covert action during the Guatemalan operation. The ex-FBI agent was a discreet spy, and his methodology put him at odd with the Grotties.

Richard Helms, the DD/PS chief of operations, became de facto leader of the circumspect spies due to his position as Bissell’s deputy. His relationship with Bissell can best be described as belligerent – the two men disliked each other. Men like Helms drove Fords; the Grotties preferred imported sports cars. Helms sardonically referred to Bissell as “Wonder Boy” and Bissell reciprocated in kind by calling Helms “the Eminence Grease,” because of Helms’ slicked hair.²¹ By the time Bissell established the WH/4, Helms openly opposed his boss’s plan to overthrow Castro. He considered it a fool’s errand, on the part of “Wonder Boy,” to attempt to overthrow the Castro regime through direct covert action. Therefore, he avoided the covert program like a plague, always reminding people that he had nothing to do with the project. “Helms figured that there was a high likelihood that this thing would screw up, and he didn’t want to have the tar baby around him,” stated Dick Drain, the chief of operations for WH/4.²² On the other hand, Bissell saw Helms as another J.C King, full of *amour propre* and hostility towards the philosophy of covert action. He tried to get Helms transferred to a relatively obscure post, but Dulles wisely declined the request. Unable to get rid of Helms, Bissell simply stiff-armed his deputy out of the way. This was unfortunate because Bissell could have used Helms’ expertise. He later regretted taking such drastic measures to silence the opposition. “I regret

²⁰ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA’s Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 39.

²¹ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 240-241.

²² Ibid.

today that I did not take Helms' views more seriously and that I did not encourage sufficient discussion among my colleagues to allow their concerns to be raised," Bissell ruminated years later.²³

Essentially, Bissell purged all the prudent spies and filled the WH/4's positions with agents belonging to the covert action camp or who simply wanted a piece of the action. The initial task organization consisted of forty agents: eighteen at headquarters, twenty at the Havana station, and two at the Santiago de Cuba station.²⁴ Bissell nominated Jacob D. Esterline as the head of the new branch. Esterline had played an important role in operation PBSUCCESS, and as a reward for his performance, Dulles made him the first post-coup chief of station in Guatemala City. Three years later he went on to serve as the chief of station in Caracas, Venezuela. While in Caracas, Frank Wisner told Esterline that the Agency was considering taking action against Castro. "Well, if there is anything I can do when I finish my tour here let me know," Esterline told Wisner.²⁵ Not long after Esterline uttered those words, the Agency recalled him to lead the WH/4 team.²⁶ On 24 March 1960, WH/4 was officially approved on paper.

Creating the Plan

Towards the end of January 1960, WH/4 initiated the contingency planning for covert action against the Castro regime, and Dulles recommended keeping the president and the NSC in the dark. The DCI wanted the WH/4 to envision a plan with a course of action that entailed not the "quick elimination of Castro, but rather actions designed to enable responsible opposition

²³ Thomas Power, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 126, 135; Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 241; Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 177.

²⁴ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 32.

²⁵ Peter Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified: The Secret CIA Report on the Invasion of Cuba* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 258.

²⁶ Ibid.

leaders to get a foothold" in the island.²⁷ Planners developed a concept that consisted of using Cuban exiles with previous military experience as instructors for other Cubans willing to infiltrate the island to conduct paramilitary operations. After a careful selection and evaluation process, these men would go through an intensive certification training program to become qualified paramilitary instructors. Fort Randolph, located near the Panama Canal, was the recommended training site. Upon completion of the certification process, the instructor cadre would then travel to another country in Latin America and clandestinely train other Cuban recruits in guerrilla warfare. The Cuban paramilitaries would be "organized into small teams similar to the U.S. Army Special Forces concept, and infiltrated with communicators, into areas of Cuba where it had been determined numbers of dissidents existed who required specialized skills, leadership, and military supplies."²⁸ The Jedburghs and the underground organizations of WWII provided the model.²⁹

In early February 1960, the WH/4 pitched the general concept of the operation to DCI Dulles. Esterline and his planners briefed in general terms how the Agency would establish a "covert group inside Cuba to foment unrest and build underground connections with dissidents," and develop a "paramilitary contingent outside Cuba to engage in covert action on the island."³⁰ Impressed with the concept, Dulles gave the WH/4 two more weeks to finalize the plan for the Special Group. Eisenhower had created the Special Group in 1954 to supervise and narrow the CIA's latitude on covert operations. It consisted initially of four members: the deputy undersecretary of state, the deputy secretary of defense, the DCI, and the special assistant to the

²⁷ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 43.

²⁸ Luis Aguilar, *Operation Zapata: The "Ultrasensitive" Report and Testimony of the Board of Inquiry on the Bay of Pigs* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1981), 56.

²⁹ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 154.

³⁰ Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 19.

president for national security affairs. By 1959, the group had grown and met weekly to review and approve covert operations.

The urgency of completing the Cuban plan was part of Dulles' mission-creep scheme to get the administration's approval for a covert action program against the Castro regime. He had requested the authorization to sabotage the Cuban sugar industry, but Eisenhower doubted the efficacy of economic sabotage as a method of solving the problems in Cuba.³¹ Luckily for Dulles, Castro's bellicosity irritated Eisenhower; he wanted something more ambitious. By late February, the president directed Dulles to prepare a comprehensive covert action program. Unbeknownst to Eisenhower, the CIA already had a comprehensive program waiting for his approval.

Titled "A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime," the covert action plan included the aforementioned components and called for the achievement of four major objectives. First, the creation of an anti-Castro political opposition group outside of Cuba. The CIA hoped to use this group as a cover for their operations against the Castro regime. The Agency would work with trusted Cuban politicians in all areas, from recruitment to direct action. Second, the implementation of an anti-Castro propaganda campaign. The erosion of Castro's popularity was key to bringing the dictator down. Third, create a clandestine network in Cuba that would provide the agency valuable intelligence and serve as a direct-action apparatus under the control of the anti-Castro exile opposition. Fourth, the development of a paramilitary force outside of Cuban territory. This specialized group of men would secretly infiltrate the island to train and direct resistance forces. Like in Guatemala, the essence of the plan was the combination

³¹ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 - January 1960*, 49-50.

of guerrilla infiltration and psychological warfare. The State Department would play its part by applying economic pressure and by using the OAS as a tool for imposing sanctions on Cuba.³²

Around the time that the WH/4 completed its anti-Castro plan, a cautionary analysis of the potential success of the operation mysteriously emerged from within the department. The unsigned memorandum compared the anti-Arbenz operation in Guatemala with the contemporary anti-Castro operation in Cuba. The paper suggested that the favorable conditions that existed in Guatemala were absent in Cuba. Its author(s) argued that in Guatemala, the government leadership was “unusually inept,” and “Communist support for Arbenz came from the local Communist Party, which was immature, badly led, and generally weak;” and the Agency “had unbelievable luck.”³³ The author also noted the glaring difference between Fidel Castro and Jacobo Arbenz: the former was a strong leader, while the latter was weak. Additionally, in Guatemala the Agency had an opposition leader of “high character and standing;” but none existed in Cuba. Interestingly, the document downplayed the WH/4’s assumption on the effect of psywar on the Cuban army, stating that the possibility of turning the army against Castro was highly unlikely: “Arbenz, a professional army officer, had left the armed forces of Guatemala virtually unchanged – and could not rely on them in the crisis; Castro has largely liquidated Batista’s armed forces, filled key military posts with his trusted followers, and introduced a system of intense ideological indoctrination.”³⁴ The outcome of the operation did not look promising. To nobody’s surprise, the WH/4 planners ignored the unwelcomed assessment. The issues raised in the document never emerged in any meeting and no significant

³² Annex A, “A Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime” in *Inspector General’s Survey of the Cuban Operation and Associated Documents, October 1961*. George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB341/IGrpt1.pdf> (accessed July, 2016).

³³ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA’s Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 54.

³⁴ Michael Warner, “The CIA’s Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair: Lessons Unlearned,” *Studies in Intelligence* 40 (1998), 93-101, Central Intelligence Agency. https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter98_99/art08.html (accessed August 2016).

changes were made to the plan. Worth noting is the fact the memorandum came from an anonymous author (or authors), who likely refused to sign for fear of reprisals. As operation PBSUCCESS showed, those who provided unsolicited criticism were unceremoniously dumped.

The Anti-Castro Program

On 17 March, Dulles presented the "Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime" to Eisenhower in a combined meeting of the National Security Council and key members of the Special Group. Dulles touched on all key points of the covert action plan: create a paramilitary force; establish a medium wave radio station to carry out anti-Castro propaganda; form a moderate opposition group in exile. The CIA spymaster explained how a coalition of representatives from multiple political parties could be formed within a month and unified under the slogan "Restore the Revolution." The Cuban council would serve as a recruiting and coordination center for anti-Castro activities. An impressed Eisenhower admitted that he knew of "no better plan for dealing with the situation," but had concerns about plausible deniability.³⁵ He reminded his staff of the importance of deniability and suggested that everyone must be prepared to deny any knowledge of the operation. According to Major General Andrew Goodpaster, staff secretary and Eisenhower's trusted defense liaison officer, the president wanted a small American footprint in the operation: "He said we should limit American contacts with the groups involved to two or three people, getting Cubans to do most of what must be done."³⁶ Eisenhower had issued the same guidance six years before for operation PBSUCCESS. As a final directive, "the president said that at the next meeting he would want to know what is the sequence of

³⁵ "Memorandum of a Conference with the President," 17 March 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958 – 1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, eds. John P. Glennon and Ronald D. Landa (Washington: GPO, 1991), 861. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d486> (accessed March, 2017).

³⁶ Ibid.

events by which we see the situation developing – specifically what actions are we to take.”³⁷

Finally, after months of deliberations on what to do about the situation in Cuba, the CIA had come through with a feasible plan that Eisenhower liked. On that same day the president flashed the green light – authorizing \$4.4 million for the operation. Concerns such as those raised in the anonymous memorandum were never discussed at the meeting.

Immediately after Eisenhower approved the anti-Castro plan, the CIA began making serious preparations for the operation. Under the cover of a job placement company (the “Bender Group”), the Agency acquired a number of safe houses in Miami, utilized the Opa-locka airport as a logistics base, and Useppa Island, located on Florida’s west coast, became a temporary assessment and holding site for recruits. The Agency also took steps toward creating the *Frente Revolucionario Democrático* (FRD) – the council responsible for attracting and organizing the Cuban opposition. And the Greater Swan Island, a small island ninety miles off the coast of Honduras, became the site for the anti-Castro propaganda effort.

From May to July 1960, the CIA set out to recruit and train three hundred guerrillas. Among the first group to arrive at Useppa Island were ex-Cuban army officers who had been recruited by the FRD to become the certified instructor cadre responsible for training the Cuban guerrillas. At Useppa these men went through a preliminary screening consisting of polygraphs, psychological, and psychiatric tests. Some of the men stayed on the island to complete basic Morse code training, while others went to Panama for a seven-week certification course on paramilitary operations that consisted on teaching all aspects of security operations, basic clandestine tradecraft, intelligence collection and reporting, reception operations, explosive and demolition techniques, and guerrilla action. In addition, the training included a week-long weapons familiarization course where each candidate learned the characteristics and capabilities

³⁷ Ibid, 863.

of the M-1 carbine, the Garand, and the Springfield rifle. As the final certifying exercise, the paramilitary students had to successfully plan and execute a simulated assault on an "army base." The Cubans' toughness and tactical proficiency impressed the American instructors, who rewarded their performance with a jovial farewell party.³⁸

Before leaving the Canal Zone, one of the American trainers enthusiastically told the Cubans that in Guatemala "everything was ready" at a camp that had "five thousand men" – nothing could have been further from the truth. When the certified Cuban instructors arrived on 22 August 1960, the camp's population consisted of just 112 trainees. Located in a 5,000-acre coffee plantation called Helvetia, near the mountains of the Guatemalan Pacific coast, the camp lacked the adequate infrastructure to support any type of military training; therefore, instead of training, the Cubans spent most of their time building the training and living facilities. It was not until the latter part of September 1960 that the camp finally had enough facilities and instructors to conduct a four-week basic guerrilla training course. Even as these substantial improvements made camp life tolerable, the shortages of food and supplies remained a nagging issue. The base commandant sent cables to WH/4 headquarters complaining about the shortages. "My men are going hungry and barefoot," read one of the cables.³⁹ Another big problem was the internal troubles of the FRD. The bickering among political leaders stalled the recruitment process. In July, the CIA had asked the Cuban council to recruit 500 individuals, but by the end of September only a quarter arrived in camp.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the CIA had established a clandestine radio station on Swan Island – an uninhabited landmass that the Agency used in 1954 during its psywar against the Arbenz

³⁸ Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 129, George Washington University National Security Archive, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB341/IGrpt1.pdf> (accessed July, 2016); Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs*, 36-39.

³⁹ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation and Associated Documents*, 128.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 127; Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs*, 39; Triay, *Bay of Pigs*, 11.

government in Guatemala. Upon completion of the Guatemalan operation, the CIA took away most of the radio equipment, but some stayed behind. Within two months, all mission-essential equipment was brought in, a small landing strip was built on the island, and by 17 May, the station began broadcasting anti-Castro propaganda. The 50,000-watt station covered the entire Caribbean and became the flagship of the anti-Castro movement. Using both medium and short-wave, the station broadcasted programs in English and Spanish for two hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. There were, however, problems: the broadcasts reflected the political ambitions of Cubans in Miami, and disregarded the situation of Cubans trapped in the island. As a result, the station lost credibility with its listeners. Furthermore, *the New York Times* published a front-page article compromising the cover for Radio Swan's operations.⁴¹ By the end of 1960 everyone knew about Radio Swan, including the Castro regime.⁴²

The creation of the *Frente Revolucionario Democrático* (FRD) proved no easy task for the CIA. The abundance of splintered anti-Castro groups made the formation of a political council a difficult endeavor. The *Accion Cubana Institucionalista* (ACI), *Organizacion Democrata de la Majagua*, and the *Crusade of Revolutionaries Against Communism* were some of the major groups in the long CIA list.⁴³ DCI Dulles complained that at one time or another more than 184 groups had existed.⁴⁴ To make matters worse, these groups did not get along, and were in constant competition for funds, supplies, and support from the American government. In

⁴¹ "American Radio in the Caribbean Counters Red Campaign in Cuba," *New York Times*, September 9, 1960.

⁴² "Memorandum of a Meeting with the President," 18 August 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958 – 1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, 1058. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/pg_1057 (accessed March, 2017); Kornbluh, *Bay of Pigs Declassified*, 275; Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 156.

⁴³ William C. Baggs, "The Other Miami – City of Intrigue," *New York Times*, March 13, 1960;

⁴⁴ Gordon Gray, "Memorandum of a Meeting with the President," 29 November 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958 – 1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, 1128. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d613> (accessed March, 2017).

the end, only six prominent opposition leaders – Aureliano Sanchez Arango, Manuel Artime Buesa, Jose Rasco, Antonio Varona, Justo Carrillo, and Jose Miro Cardona – made the final cut to become part of the FRD. All of them had substantial followings in Cuba. After ironing out their political differences, the leaders formed the organizing committee of the FRD in May 1960, and by June they moved their headquarters to Mexico City, where they publicly issued a manifesto calling on the support of Cubans and Latin Americans, and pledging to reestablish a representative democratic government in Cuba.⁴⁵

In forming the FRD, the Agency demonstrated, as in Guatemala, a lack of cultural awareness and understanding of the operational environment. Placing an overbearing emphasis on excluding groups from the far-right and far-left of the political spectrum, the Agency focused its attention on personalities and groups who held centrist views. This selective approach diminished the FRD's ability to project political power and limited its access to resources. For example, the decision to not allow *Batistianos* (ex-Batista followers) and conservative groups to form part of the anti-Castro council restricted the FRD's access to valuable resources. The members of these political organizations were rich and had assets, such as boats and capital, which could have been exploited by the FRD. Some possessed valuable military experience and others had "American friends who were influential enough to urge their claims to consideration upon the White House."⁴⁶ The exclusion of the far-left groups hurt as well because they enjoyed a substantial following inside Cuba. In the end, the Agency's methods obviated the formation of a unified and cooperative anti-Castro coalition, and intensified the internecine rivalry among the anti-Castro groups. For this reason, the FRD never played an authoritative role in organizing, training, and directing the anti-Castro program. The leaders at WH/4 realized that "if the plan

⁴⁵ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 82-85; "Unit in Mexico Maps Anti-Castro Fight," *New York Times*, June 22, 1960.

⁴⁶ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 82.

was to remain viable and have any chance of success, the United States would have to assume all the decision making."⁴⁷ A frustrated Bissell admitted that as the planning and staging for the operation progressed, it became "less and less possible to rely on the Cuban politicians."⁴⁸

At the same time when Cuban recruits headed to Panama and Radio Swan went on the air, the CIA hired Air National Guard (ANG) personnel to serve as instructors to Cuban air crews. Their key task consisted of training and certifying twelve to fifteen combat pilots in the B-26 aircraft and eight to ten transport pilots in the C-46. The training covered the fundamentals of air infiltration and exfiltration, propaganda and supply drops, and tactical target acquisition. WH/4 wanted an exile Cuban air force capable of neutralizing various operational targets such as shipping, docking facilities, and harassment of the target area with close air support. Planners expected the certification process to last until 1 November 1960. The FRD selected individuals who had been members of the Cuban air force, Cubana Airlines personnel, and private pilots. From a motel in Coral Gables, CIA agents interviewed and processed more than seventy candidates, questioning them about their flying experience, and subjecting each candidate to intensive security, medical, psychological, and psychiatric screening. Those who passed went immediately to the Retalhuleu airstrip in Guatemala for training.⁴⁹

This recruitment effort almost ended the same day it started as a result of the CIA not paying for the motel room that field agents used to conduct their interviews. According to one of the agents, "the landlady came over and caught us recruiting some of the initial Cuban pilots. We

⁴⁷ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 156.

⁴⁸ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 82-85; Piero Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 7.

⁴⁹ Jack B. Pfeiffer, *Air Operations, March 1960-April 1961* (CIA Official History of the Bay of Pigs Operation, 1979), 71, 95-105. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/bop-vol1-part2.pdf> (accessed August 2016).

had to make sure that she was paid so that we could continue our job.”⁵⁰ The screening process turned into a circus because American interrogators showed more interest in learning Spanish than asking relevant questions. Eduardo Ferrer reported that during the five days of questioning the interrogator only cared about improving his Spanish vocabulary.⁵¹ The Cubans went away with an extremely dim view of the recruitment process, which led to a substandard assessment on their qualifications. The instructors found out fairly quickly that the Cubans were second-rate pilots who needed more than just “retraining.” In the first month of training one of the most experienced Cuban pilots damaged the landing gear of his C-46 during a basic landing exercise.⁵² Another pilot, who the Agency also characterized as “experienced,” had to make an emergency landing in Mexico after he mismanaged the fuel reserves – the plane had been dropping supplies to guerrillas in Cuba.⁵³ This incident in particular turned into a serious breach of security because the Mexican authorities seized the aircraft and the crew. Luckily, the chief of the Guatemalan Air Force, Colonel Antonio Batres, interceded on behalf of the CIA to secure the release of the air crew, but the plane became property of the Mexican government.⁵⁴ These types of mishaps continued throughout the operation, creating a rift in the relationship between trainees and their instructors. As time passed, the confidence in the Cubans’ ability to get the job done deteriorated. By the fall of 1960, “there were constant requests from the field for authorization to use the American pilots in both the transport and in combat training operations.”⁵⁵

On 18 August 1960, DCI Dulles and Bissell provided a progress report to Eisenhower on all the critical components of the operation – paramilitary training, Radio Swan, the FRD, and air

⁵⁰ Ibid, 105.

⁵¹ Edward B. Ferrer, *Operation Puma: The Air Battle of the Bay of Pigs* (Miami: International Aviation Consultants, 1982), 44-46.

⁵² Ibid, 73-74.

⁵³ Pfeiffer, *Air Operations, March 1960-April 1961*, 113.

⁵⁴ Ferrer, *Operation Puma*, 74-75.

⁵⁵ Pfeiffer, *Air Operations, March 1960-April 1961*, 115.

operations. During the meeting the spymasters never mentioned any of the problems the Agency faced with mounting the operation; how Radio Swan's broadcasts reflected the power struggles between the Cuban groups that produced the various programs; how the ideological differences between the leaders of the FRD engendered a volatile unity and presented an ongoing threat to the success of the operation; or that the internal bickering among the Cubans had slowed the recruitment process. By late August, only seventy-eight paramilitary trainees had arrived at the training camp in Guatemala. Nevertheless, Dulles reported that the instructor cadres were heading to Guatemala to instruct "about 500 Cubans."⁵⁶ At the time, the camp could not accommodate this number of recruits – by late November only 370 out of the required 500 trainees were in Guatemala.⁵⁷

The meeting with the president demanded an honest and open assessment, but in common with the Iran and Guatemala operations, the dirty laundry was kept out of sight. When the Agency had all sorts of problems with operation PBSUCCESS, there was no cancellation or special briefing to the president; the Agency simply pushed ahead according to plan. After all, setbacks were part of covert operations. To the covert action strategists, the issues with the anti-Castro project were trivial and internal matters that needed no presidential involvement. They knew the odds were always long in covert operations; and as the outcome in Iran and Guatemala had shown, success depended on boldness. Why would the Cuban operation be any different? The spy chief simply reported that everything was moving forward satisfactorily in all areas of the operation. In response, the president approved a budget of \$13 million, and gave the approval to use Department of Defense personnel and equipment to support the operation. His only

⁵⁶ "Memorandum of a Meeting with the President," 18 August 1960, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958 – 1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, 1058.

⁵⁷ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 17, 127.

restriction was that no U.S military personnel could be involved in combat operations – a directive that did not hold.

Chapter 4: Plunging Across the Rubicon

John Kennedy first heard of the plan to overthrow Castro ten days after his election. On 18 November, Bissell and Dulles flew down to the Kennedy winter home in Florida to brief the president-elect on the project. Bissell explained to Kennedy that a “force of 600 men would be landed by Landing Ship, Tank (LST) on Cuban shores” and “move inland to create a safe area in the mountain fastness” where another 600 guerrillas were waiting.¹ As the youthful president-elect listened attentively, the scope of the operation made him uneasy. Even though expressing surprise at the size of the operation, he showed no signs of being for or against it. If Kennedy had objections, he kept it to himself to avoid a breach of political etiquette – he wanted to appear in “the guise of a successful political candidate and not seem to be acting as if he was already in office.”² Consequently, Kennedy avoided any involvement in policy affairs during the post-election period. Thomas Mann, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, stated in his memoirs that the incoming administration decided to have “no discussion of policy matters” with the outgoing Eisenhower administration.³ After the CIA brief in November, neither Kennedy nor his advisers contacted the Agency for further information on the Cuban operation. The communication blackout lasted until Kennedy took office. This “hands-off” approach by the incoming administration was a costly mistake.⁴

The Setbacks

Kennedy’s apprehension about the operation was understandable. A few months before the elections he had received a generic brief on Cuba containing only basic information on the

¹ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA’s Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 148.

² Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 160.

³ Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night,” 14.

⁴ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 160; Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 241.

FRD, the propaganda plan, the communist influence in the island, and Castro's activities in Latin America, but nothing about an invasion force.⁵ Dulles never told Kennedy that "there was, on the back of the stove, a project to arm some" of the Cuban refugees and "help the underground in Cuba."⁶ Since the covert operation was still in its incipient stages, the spy boss did not bother to bring it up. "It wasn't going to affect anything politically," Dulles told his interviewer Thomas Braden in 1964. "I did not brief candidates on secret operations which were destined to come out only in the future, and with respect to which the candidate, if elected, would have all the opportunity in the world to pass his own judgment as to whether he wanted to go ahead."⁷ These were Dulles' ground rules.

What had started in early spring as a simple plan to send a few dozen guerrillas to the Cuban mountains had become by November a D-Day-style amphibious assault – a few hundred Cubans storming a beachhead with heavy equipment and air support. In a February 1961 memorandum, Bissell explained to the White House why the guerrilla concept had ceased to exist as a viable option:

1. It is considered militarily infeasible to infiltrate in small units a force of this size to a single area where it could assemble, receive supplies, and engage in coordinated military action. Such an operation would have to be done over a period of time and the loss of the element of surprise after initial infiltrations would permit government forces to frustrate further reinforcements to the same area.
2. Military units significantly smaller than the battalion presently undergoing unit training would fall short of the 'minimum critical mass' required to give any significant likelihood of success. Smaller scale infiltrations would not produce a psychological effect sufficient to precipitate general uprisings of wide-spread revolt among disaffected elements of Castro's armed forces.

⁵ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 102-103.

⁶ Allen W. Dulles, recorded interview by Thomas Braden, December 5 and 6, 1964, 8, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-AWD-01.aspx> (accessed January, 2017)

⁷ Ibid, 9.

3. Actually, the least costly and most efficient way to infiltrate the force into a terrain suitable for protracted and powerful guerrilla operations would be by a single landing of the whole force as currently planned and its retirement from the landing point into the chosen redoubt.⁸

Although compelling, the explanation only captured part of the story. The change in concept had come about not because of military considerations, but rather because the operation, as originally planned, had been coming apart at the seams by the end of 1960. The record shows that guerrilla operations were not going well. "We were having difficulty and some change in approach was needed," Undersecretary of State Livingston Merchant told the Taylor Committee.⁹

1960 marked the year when Castro methodically solidified his control over the major institutions of Cuban society and employed them as an instrument of repression. Castro placed his most trusted leaders at the head of labor unions, student groups, and professional organizations. Furthermore, his regime created a highly effective neighborhood spy system to keep the population under constant surveillance. These control measures made impossible the establishment of an effective underground network. The island's small clandestine networks were unable to protect and move people from one location to another without risking exposure or capture. Castro's security forces generally arrested infiltrators almost as soon as they landed on the island. This situation worsened when Castro launched a major dragnet operation (called *Lucha contra Bandidos*, War Against the Bandits) against the active resistance.¹⁰ In the

⁸ Memorandum, "Cuba," 17 February 1961, 4, Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. Countries. Cuba: General 1961: January-April. JFKNSF-035-017. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKNSF-035-017.aspx> (Accessed August, 2016).

⁹ Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 55; Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 3; Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 59. The Taylor Committee was Kennedy's response to the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation. The president asked the reputable soldier-scholar, General Maxwell Taylor, to conduct a thorough after-action review/investigation to find out why the operation failed.

¹⁰ See Victor Dreke, *From Escambray to the Congo: In the Whirlwind of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002).

Escambray mountains, where the most effective guerrilla groups operated, an overwhelming militia force surrounded the region and slowly destroyed the local opposition.¹¹

Air operations fared no better. The effort to airdrop supplies and equipment to resistance fighters was a total disaster. The first mission, which consisted of delivering 12,000 pounds of supplies to guerrillas in the Escambray, resulted in utter failure. The pilots misjudged their target as they flew over the drop zone and released the cargo on top of a power station. The Castro militia recovered the cargo, and the ground agent expecting the delivery was caught and shot. To make matters worse, the air crew – who according to the CIA had over 45,000 hours of flight time – got lost on the way back to Guatemala and landed in Comitán, Mexico. The CIA inspector general's report sarcastically noted that the plane "is still there." Out of a total of thirty missions, the Cuban exile air force had only four successful drops. Most of the time the air crews missed their targets or the guerrilla reception party failed to find their way to the drop zones. These issues forced a temporary suspension of clandestine drops, worsening the already precarious situation of the resistance fighters. The fighters reacted by inundating WH/4 case officers with desperate pleas: "unjust to delay operation so much...this is not a game;" "how long will I have to wait for the drop. The lives of peasants and students depend on you."¹² In the end, these groups were all picked up by Castro's forces. The CIA's covert action strategists had originally envisioned an operational model similar to the French resistance of World War II, but instead they got another Albania.¹³

¹¹ Memorandum, "Cuba," 17 February 1961, 1, Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers.

¹² Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 109.

¹³ Ibid, 98, 100; Pfeiffer, *Air Operations, March 1960-April 1961*, 113; As discussed in Chapter 1, "The Dulles Faction and the Rise of Covert Operations," the Agency's covert action camp attempted a similar covert operation in Albania to support the local anti-communist networks that ended in utter failure as well; See also Lyman Kirkpatrick, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, 26 April 1967, transcript, John F. Kennedy Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-LBK-01.aspx> (accessed December 7, 2017).

The Agency's inability to build an effective guerrilla network inside Cuba set off alarm bells among skeptics – especially in the Department of State. Foggy Bottom officials questioned the wisdom of continuing the anti-Castro program. They pushed for an immediate National Security Council (NSC) review of the operation. Thomas Mann raised concerns over the prospects of success and the political implications of American involvement in the covert plot. In Mann's view, it was only a "matter of time until Guatemalan, Cuban, or international-body investigators establish beyond reasonable doubt that the Guatemalan government has lent itself and portions of its national territory to U.S. operations against Castro."¹⁴ Aside from doubting that a small Cuban exile force could actually ignite a popular uprising in Cuba, Mann also questioned the Agency's ability to organize a strong dissident movement inside Cuba. Feeling the pressure and fearing an unexpected cancellation, the leadership at WH/4 relied on "scare tactic" rhetoric to defend their position. "The degree to which we are already committed in JMATE would pose a monumental security problem alone if we were suddenly instructed to cease and desist from further activity," the Chief of WH/4, Jack Esterline, told the NSC.¹⁵ Esterline argued that a cancellation would engender serious political backlash and embarrass the United States. The Cubans, explained the WH/4 Chief, would accuse the Eisenhower administration of lacking the courage and determination to oust Castro, making the United States look weak in the eyes of other countries. The CIA won the argument and the diplomats at Foggy Bottom had no choice but to grudgingly toe the line.¹⁶

From Guerrillas to Invasion Force

¹⁴ "Establishment of Anti-Cuban Bases in the United States," 10 November 1960, Document 610, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958 – 1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, 1124.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d610> (accessed March, 2017).

¹⁵ The crypt for the WH/4 anti-Castro operation was initially JMARC. Sometime between 6 and 13 December, it changed to JMATE; Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 111.

¹⁶ Ibid, 112-133.

It was in this inauspicious atmosphere that the CIA began to implement a new concept that called for the use of a larger force and a reorientation of training objectives. The operational shift received Bissell's approval – with consent from Dulles – on 31 October 1960. Two days later, the WH/4 headquarters dispatched a cable to agents in Guatemala directing them to transition from guerrilla warfare to specialized conventional training on amphibious and airborne assault. "From that time on," notes the Taylor Committee's report, "the training emphasis was placed on the assault mission and there is no evidence that the members of the assault force received any further preparation for guerrilla type operations. The men became deeply imbued with the importance of the landing operation and its superiority over any form of guerrilla action to the point that it would have been difficult later to persuade them to return to a guerrilla-type mission."¹⁷ Having no official presidential approval, the CIA's decision to change the concept of the operation turned the JMATE project into a rogue operation – but taking the side of caution, the spymasters informed the Special Group of the decision by mid-November. With Eisenhower rendered into a lame duck, the Special Group gave no verdict of "approval" or "disapproval;" that decision rested with the incoming president.

Under the Truman administration the NSC 10/2 directive had given the CIA a *carte blanche* on covert action. It directed the Agency to conduct "covert" rather than "psychological" operations, defining covert operations as all activities "which are conducted or sponsored" by the government "against a hostile foreign state or groups or in support of friendly foreign states or groups but which are so planned and executed that any U.S. government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the U.S. government can plausibly

¹⁷ Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 6.

disclaim any responsibility for them.”¹⁸ By the outbreak of the Korean War, covert action became the most expensive and dominant operation within the CIA. This situation alarmed DCI Bedell Smith, who sought to rein in the expanding scope and magnitude of covert activities. As part of Smith’s reorganization of the CIA, he oversaw the formation of the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) – which fell under the NSC umbrella – that expanded the director’s oversight of covert operations and guerrilla warfare. Towards the end of Truman’s presidency, the CIA enjoyed unprecedented autonomy in the field of covert action but only the DCI and the president had the authority to order, approve or cancel an operation. This changed under Eisenhower.¹⁹

The formation of NSC 5412, known as the Special Group, established new parameters for the CIA: “the DCI was made responsible for coordinating with the designated representative of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense to ensure that covert operations were planned and conducted in a manner consistent with U.S. foreign and military policies.”²⁰ Each representative, including the president, “were to be advised in advance of major covert action programs initiated by the CIA and give policy approval for such programs.”²¹ The spymasters had to seek executive branch approval before proceeding with a covert operation. The creation of the Special Group highlighted Eisenhower’s distrust of covert operations.

On 29 November 1960, Eisenhower met with the National Security Council for another update on the Cuban operation. As the CIA laid out the new changes, the president grew visibly irritated, expressing his discontent with the situation. Voicing some of the similar concerns that

¹⁸ “Notes on Covert Actions” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XII, Western Europe*, eds. James E. Miller and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), xxxii-xxxv. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v12/actionsstatement> (accessed March, 2017).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Kennedy had raised during Bissell's briefing eleven days earlier, Eisenhower "wondered whether the situation did not have the appearance of beginning to get out of hand."²² He asked the spymasters two pointed questions: "are we being sufficiently imaginative and bold, subject to not letting our hand appear?" and "are we doing the things we are doing effectively?"²³ As the minutes of the meeting make clear, these two questions channeled the president's frustration, and growing reservations, on how the CIA was handling the Cuban operation. According to the National Security Advisor Gordon Gray, Eisenhower directed that a "sound person" be selected as "coordinating chief" for the project. He wanted an "individual executive to pull the whole Cuban situation together who would know precisely at all times what State, CIA, and the military were doing and who could answer questions directly should the President require them."²⁴ Ambassador Whiting Willauer was chosen to oversee the program and serve as the president's eyes and ears until the new administration took over.

Despite his mounting frustration and distrust, Eisenhower allowed the CIA to proceed with the new operational concept; in part because his determination to deal with Castro remained strong and because the new concept imposed no commitments that "might bind the new president in dealing with the Castro problem."²⁵ In fact, the Cuban exile force "was still so small and relatively unprepared that it could easily have been disbanded if the incoming administration considered its existence unnecessary."²⁶ Eisenhower understood the final decision would rest on

²² "Memorandum of a Meeting with the President," 29 November 1960, Document 613, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Cuba, Volume VI*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), 1127-1129.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d613> (accessed March, 2017).

²³ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 160.

²⁴ "Memorandum of a Meeting with the President," 29 November 1960, Document 613, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), 1129-1130.

²⁵ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 200.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the shoulders of the incoming administration, but he hoped Kennedy "would follow the general line."²⁷

Eisenhower's Hidden-Handed Leadership

Only after receiving Eisenhower's tacit endorsement of the new concept did the CIA formally brief the 5412 Committee (Special Group). On 8 December 1960, the WH/4's paramilitary chief described the new plan to the Special Group as consisting of an amphibious landing with 600-750 men armed with heavy weapons and equipment. The overall objective was to seize, hold, and maintain a visible presence in a limited piece of terrain in order to "trigger a general uprising" within Cuba. The operational and tactical success of the operation depended on preliminary air strikes against hard and soft military targets. But since the CIA did not write a formal draft for the operational shift, no hard evidence exists of a formal approval by the Special Group.²⁸

The record indicates that Eisenhower made key decisions on each of the three major briefings on the Cuba project: On 17 March, he approved the original covert plan; On 18 August, he increased the budget; and on 28 November he tacitly approved and encouraged the CIA to continue developing the new concept. In between these important briefings, the president's top advisors kept him informed on all pertinent matters discussed by the Special Group. This approach was consistent with his handling of the operation in Guatemala and also with his managerial style: the "hidden-handed" approach. Eisenhower never followed covert operations closely, and "wanted only to be informed at critical moments," reserving the right to cancel the operation at any time.²⁹ He wanted to be kept in the dark in order to show that his hands were

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 7, 64.

²⁹ Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night," 13.

clean in the event of an unexpected setback. As Major General Goodpaster noted, the president's *modus operandi* consisted of the following:

The covert operations were reviewed by the Special Group and then the President's assistant would report to Eisenhower and unless Eisenhower was opposed, the CIA was free to go ahead. It was very unusual for Eisenhower to be briefed directly on a particular covert operation by the CIA. This was done to keep plausible denial, to have a buffer between the CIA and the President.³⁰

Therefore, Eisenhower had no problem in letting Dulles and his boys have a free hand in the anti-Castro program.

By the time WH/4 planners completed the first official draft of the invasion plan, Eisenhower was no longer president. This explains why, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Eisenhower put some distance between himself and the operation by stating that under his administration "no tactical or operational plan" was ever approved before handing over the presidency to Kennedy. In typical Eisenhower fashion, he deflected fault or blame for the fiasco. "At no time did I put before anybody anything that could be called a plan to invade Cuba," Eisenhower stated during an interview in 1965.³¹ He was correct. In fact, the operation remained relatively modest until Kennedy's inauguration. The only major steps taken to implement the new concept were the authorization to employ U.S. Army Special Forces as training cadre and the use of Puerto Cabezas airfield in Nicaragua as a staging base.³²

Allowing the shift was a low-risk decision for Eisenhower because Kennedy would be the one approving the operation. Just like eight years before when Eisenhower inherited Truman's covert action plan against Mossadeq in Iran, Kennedy would inherit the anti-Castro plan. It was a precedent that Truman established and Eisenhower continued. Both covert operations in Iran and Guatemala carried over from the Truman to the Eisenhower

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA's Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 200.

³² Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night," 15.

administration; and Eisenhower approved them because he knew they were low investment/high reward operations and blame or fault for their failure could not be attached to him.

A Well-Known Secret

Everything that unfolded after JMATE received executive approval in early spring 1960 points to the operation having been compromised at all levels, rendering Eisenhower's directive of not letting the "U.S. hand show" into a complete fantasy. Since its inception, the operation was an open secret. As early as April, the Castro regime publicly sounded the alarm on the U.S. sponsored invasion. The Cuban Foreign Minister Raul Roa accused the Guatemalan president of conspiring with the American government to arm an expedition to invade Cuba – he even went so far as to name the alleged commander of the expedition.³³ The Soviet press agency, Tass, corroborated Roa's allegations by publishing a report on CIA activities in Guatemala. The news ignited several days of civil unrest in Guatemala. Student activists took to the streets accusing the government of supporting a United States-led invasion of Cuba and harboring an anti-Castro force in the country. President Ydigoras denied the accusations, stating "Guatemala does not need nor is it offering sites for foreign bases. Neither has any friendly nation requested permission to establish bases on national territory."³⁴

Following the unrest in Guatemala, Cuban intelligence shared incontrovertible evidence of the presence of an exile force with the Soviet KGB. As a result of this information sharing, Premier Nikita Khrushchev publicly pledged to protect Cuba from any "imperialist" aggression. "Figuratively speaking," declared the Premier to a crowd of Russian teachers, "Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire if aggressive forces in the

³³ "Cuba Says Invaders Wait in Guatemala," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1960.

³⁴ Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 34.

Pentagon dare to start an intervention against Cuba.”³⁵ Emboldened by the evidence of American collusion and a Soviet pledge of protection, Castro went to the United Nations and requested a debate on the plot against his government, but the U.S. blocked the proposal. The move engendered harsh criticism from Soviet bloc nations who accused the American government of buying time in order to complete planning for the invasion.³⁶

All through 1960, the nation's news media filled their front pages with stories of a U.S. backed anti-Castro force. Newspapers continuously ran stories on Cuban recruits lining up in Miami to enlist in the anti-Castro expedition and on spectators showing up at the Opa-Locka airport to see them leave in blacked-out flights.³⁷ These front page articles attracted a sea of onlookers who snooped around the Opa-Locka airfield trying to confirm or deny what they had read in the papers. The Guatemalan training sites – especially the Retalhuleu airfield – became highly publicized. Situated between a highly travelled highway and the Tapachula-Guatemala City-San Jose railroad line, the air base was under constant observation from travelers who often stopped their vehicles to peek through the fences, while those traveling in the train had front row seats to view the aircraft and base activity. Albert C. Persons, one of the sixteen American pilots at the base, jokingly recalled how he would sit on a roof and wave at the onlookers. “They always waved back,” wrote Persons.³⁸ These security problems worsened when trainees at the base openly discussed camp matters with local inquisitors and journalists. Soon after, news agencies like *U.S. News and World Report* published headlines announcing to the entire world “The Big Buildup to Overthrow Castro.” The reporters never stayed idle. When the FRD leader,

³⁵ Osgood Caruthers, “Premier Vows Aid: Would Back Castro if U.S. Intervened by Use of Force,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1960.

³⁶ Albert C. Persons, *Bay of Pigs: A Firsthand Account of the Mission by a U.S. Pilot in Support of the Cuban Invasion Force in 1961* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990), 16-18; “Guerrilla Warfare is Stressed in Guatemala Troop Training,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1960.

³⁷ Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 46-47, 84-85; Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 34.

³⁸ Persons, *Bay of Pigs*, 46.

Miro Cardona, toured the training camps in Guatemala, the *New York Times* picked up the story and published a front page article detailing the visit. Everyone in Little Havana and the world knew what was happening in Guatemala.³⁹

The icing on the cake was a compromising front-page story by the *New York Times* providing a detailed description of the training bases in Guatemala. With the headline "U.S. Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at the Secret Guatemalan Air-Ground Base," the article highlighted the daily activities at both the Retalhuleu air base and the guerrilla training camps in the mountains.⁴⁰ The lax security at these camps allowed the *Times* reporter to wander unchecked through the premises recording everything he saw. Eisenhower noted that the "article told most of the story."⁴¹ In response to the *Times*'s story, the Guatemalan government expelled the correspondent from the country and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee demanded an explanation from the administration. This story and others made it abundantly clear that the U.S. government was leading a clandestine operation to overthrow Castro.⁴²

Sloppy Work

When it came to "doing things effectively," the CIA disappointed. As always, the Agency's Achilles heel was operational security. The training camps lacked proper

³⁹ Ibid, 18, 46, 68; Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 64; Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 138-139.

⁴⁰ Paul P. Kennedy, "U.S Helps Train an Anti-Castro Force at Secret Guatemalan Air-Ground Base," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1961.

⁴¹ Dwight Eisenhower, *White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 614.

⁴² J. William Fulbright recorded interview by Pat Holt, April 11, 1964, 43, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://archive1.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Fulbright,+J.+William/JFKOH-JWUF-01/JFKOH-JWUF-01-TR.pdf> (accessed June 2017); Persons, *Bay of Pigs*, 16, 55.

counterintelligence support and desertion was endemic. In just one month, twenty recruits deserted and never returned.⁴³ The CIA also failed to impart to the Cubans the importance of protecting sensitive information; therefore, the Cubans had no real understanding of operational security. Despite censorship efforts, the trainees sent letters to relatives containing all sorts of sensitive information. Based on the CIA Inspector General's assessment, the Cubans "knew much more than they needed to know, and they were not compartmented from each other and from Americans to the extent that was necessary."⁴⁴ Similarly, Agency personnel were extremely careless in handling classified information. One of the Agency's couriers lost a suitcase containing top-secret documents, and a senior case officer holding an operational meeting in a Miami motel was overheard through the thin walls of his room by a motel guest who reported the incident to the FBI.⁴⁵ Recruiting activities in Miami had been poorly disguised as well. The forthcoming effort to depose Castro was a hot topic of public discussion at every corner in the small Cuban enclave of Little Havana. Living in this exile community were hundreds of informers who kept the Castro regime abreast on the latest rumors circulating through the streets of Miami.⁴⁶

The Agency's inability to follow basic principles of operational security contributed to the operation's demise. Cuban agents had more than two or three CIA case officers, which created confusion and a lack of command and control. Many of the agents who operated in the island knew each other, and if captured, they could have easily identified others. To make matters worse, some agents inexplicably violated basic rules of personal security by visiting relatives who were under regime surveillance, leading to their arrest by Cuban

⁴³ Manuel Penabaz, *Giron 1961: Anatomia de una Traicion* (Miami: Daytona Printing, 1962), 65.

⁴⁴ Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 136.

⁴⁶ Persons, *Bay of Pigs*, 21.

counterintelligence. Consequently, as demand for volunteers increased, the standards for screening them declined and the cover stories for the long lines of recruits fooled no one. Additionally, the compartmentalization of the project denied agents access to mission essential information. For example, case officers responsible for sending agents to Cuba never had access to the war room or the operational plan. Most disconcerting, the “resistance groups in Cuba did not learn the time of the invasion beforehand, further undercutting the chances of a mass uprising in support of the assault.”⁴⁷

Ignoring the Warning Signs

On 8 December 1960, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) report entitled “Prospects for the Castro Regime,” substantiated what CIA planners had already witnessed and confirmed during the past nine months: Castro was “firmly in control of Cuba” and the “internal resistance” was ineffective.⁴⁸ The report provided a pessimistic assessment: “Organized opposition appears to lack the strength and coherence to pose a major threat to the regime, and we foresee no development in the internal political situation which would be likely to bring about a critical shift of popular opinion away from Castro.”⁴⁹ Intelligence analysts assessed that the Cuban army would remain loyal to “the Beard,” and any covert action against the regime would be a fruitless endeavor; the failed anti-Castro program proved it.⁵⁰ This was unwelcome news for WH/4 planners who expected the Cuban army to turn on Castro just like the Guatemalan army had done against Arbenz – a mutiny within the rank-and-file was critical.

⁴⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 207-208; Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 64 (quotation); Kirkpatrick, *Inspector General's Survey of the Cuban Operation*, 135-138.

⁴⁸ “Special National Intelligence Estimate,” 8 December 1960, Document 620, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, Volume VI, Cuba, eds. John P. Glennon and Ronald D. Landa (Washington: GPO, 1991), 1169-1170. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d620> (accessed March, 2017).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 249.

The top brass in the project – Bissell and Barnes – simply dismissed the ominous SNIE report. Any assessment by the Agency's intelligence experts – those under the Deputy Director/Intelligence – was irrelevant because the responsibility for clandestine intelligence collection and analysis rested with those directly involved in the operation. As Bissell stated, "the intelligence side of the Agency didn't have anything to do with the operation."⁵¹ The Grotties only trusted their own staff intel estimates, which had concluded that "less than 30 percent of the population is still with Fidel. In this 30 percent are included the Negroes who have always followed the strong men in Cuba but will not fight."⁵² Clearly, the decision to make the Cuban project an autonomous operation, separate from other Agency components, deprived the Grotties of objective analysis. In the process of creating the WH/4, they cut out the experts who might have offered a more realistic assessment.⁵³

Given the wealth of warning signs, the best course of action for the CIA would have been to cancel the JMATE project and return to the drawing board. Eisenhower would not have objected to such a recommendation. Eisenhower firmly believed the best decisions, especially when pressed, were the ones never made. Both as allied supreme commander in North Africa, Italy, and northwest Europe and as president, Eisenhower proved decisive only when he decided not to do something; but at the same time reserving the final decision for himself. Various agencies and staffs would busily prepare plans – even put the machinery in motion – but he kept his own counsel and freedom of action. The man who commanded Operations TORCH, HUSKY, Salerno, Anzio, and D-Day would not have approved an operation so clearly destined

⁵¹ Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, July 5, 1967, 32, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

<https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://archive2.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Bissell,+Richard+M/JFKOH-RMB-02/JFKOH-RMB-02-TR.pdf> (accessed May 2017).

⁵² Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 250.

⁵³ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 160-161.

to fail. Earlier in the year he came close to pulling the plug on the entire covert program after noticing an air of quiescence emanating from Dulles and Bissell – the two top CIA men appeared resigned to the progress in certain areas of the project. “Boys,” the president told the spymasters, “if you don’t intend to go through with this, let’s stop talking about it.”⁵⁴ Everyone in the covert action camp recognized that the “Program of Covert Action against the Castro Regime” was an abysmal failure. “Our original concept is now unachievable,” wrote the WH/4’s chief of operations, Dick Drain, in late November 1960.⁵⁵ But like the driver who speeds up at a yellow light, the CIA ignored the warning signs and decided to “continue mission” with a bolder, more direct approach: A World War II-style amphibious invasion.⁵⁶

Common sense and reason gave way to hubris and momentum. The Guatemala experience had shown the Dulles faction that risk-taking was a key component of covert operations. Wisner never slowed down when PBSUCCESS headed down the tubes; instead, he proceeded with unrelenting determination. Wisner took a calculated risk and pushed ahead. The calculus was that the Agency had been too firmly committed to turn back; that the operation “had crossed the Rubicon.”⁵⁷ Bissell and his senior planners were ready to take the same risks – including the risk of defeat – because in their mind they had also plunged across the point of no-return with JMATE. Kennedy would only help to embolden their resoluteness.

In his inaugural speech, the youthful-looking Kennedy issued a call to action centered on an aggressive roll-back of communism. The newly elected president warned the nations of the world that the United States would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support

⁵⁴ G. Scott Thomas, *A New World to be Won: John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and the Tumultuous Year of 1960* (Denver: Praeger, 2011), 163.

⁵⁵ Pfeiffer, *Evolution of CIA’s Anti-Castro Policies, 1959 – January 1960*, 149.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 243; Wyden, *The Bay of Pigs*, 69; Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 156.

⁵⁷ Cullather, *Operation PBSUCCESS*, 38.

any friend, oppose any foe" to ensure the survival of liberty.⁵⁸ Communism would not stand in the way of those nations willing to follow the path of freedom. Especially to the sister republics south of the border, he pledged joining them in opposing the "aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas" to send a clear message that the Western Hemisphere was "master of its own house."⁵⁹ These strong words were music to the ears of the Dulles faction. They saw and heard a president, who like them, was a "doer" and a "can-do type" with an inclination for bold action. The CIA could not have asked for a better Christmas gift.

⁵⁸ CBS, "President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address," filmed [20 January 1961]. YouTube Video, 15:36. Posted [January 2011]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEC1C4p0k3E>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 5: Kennedy, the CIA, and The Decision

Allen Dulles knew the Kennedys long before John F. Kennedy became president. The CIA boss first met the president's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, when he worked as a lawyer on Wall Street and the senior Kennedy was the chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) under the Roosevelt administration. Their professional relationship and Dulles' friendship with the oil executive Charles B. Wrightsman engendered a lasting acquaintance between the two men. During frequent visits to the Wrightsman estate in South Florida, Dulles would often play tennis with the patriarch of the Kennedy family – the Kennedys were neighbors to the Wrightsmans. It was during one of these visits that Dulles met the future president. At the time, the young Kennedy was convalescing from a serious illness and working on his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profile in Courage*. Despite the afflictions of physical pain, Kennedy would spend long hours chatting with Dulles about topics ranging from foreign affairs to spy stories. Most of the time these discussions ended with the intervention of Joseph Kennedy. "I would rely on Joe a good bit because I knew Joe would let me know when Jack had had about all he ought to take," Dulles recalled.¹

Despite their age difference, Kennedy grew fond of Dulles, and Dulles respected and admired Kennedy's resiliency and intellect. The spy boss considered the future president a well-informed and intelligent young man. Of course, it was no secret that the CIA director was a snob who cared about the social background of not only his agents, but acquaintances as well – only prospective agents with the appropriate educational background and undergrad club membership had a real chance of being hired by the Agency. In this regard, Kennedy fit the mold perfectly.

¹ Allen W. Dulles, recorded interview by Thomas Braden, December 5 and 6, 1964, 1-2 (quotation p.2), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Like Richard Bissell and Tracy Barnes, he had the social pedigree that Dulles liked: Ivy League educated, extremely smart, and a member of the "Eastern Aristocracy." Kennedy also shared the same romantic passion for secret operations and spy stories. As a boy, he loved reading about the exploits of secret agents in novels like John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Later he became an aficionado of the British writer Ian Fleming. He especially enjoyed the James Bond thrillers. When Dulles went down to South Florida in November 1960 to discuss the Cuban operation, Kennedy gave him a copy of one of Fleming's best books: *From Russia, With Love*. "I got so much interested," Dulles fondly admitted, "that I bought up the next two or three that he [Fleming] got out."² The exchange of spy novels and discussions on the derring-do of James Bonds continued between the two until Kennedy's death in 1963.³

The Bromance

After the 1960 presidential elections, the newly elected president wasted no time in making one special request to the man he deeply respected. "Allen," Kennedy said, "I'd like to have you stay on as director of Central Intelligence when I take over next January 20th."⁴ The request flattered and pleased Dulles, who at the time wanted to make the Agency apolitical by establishing the precedent of serving under a Republican and Democratic administration. As Dulles later explained:

I thought that the one thing that could be most damaging to the Agency at the time of presidential change is that if you establish the precedent that when a new president, new director of Central Intelligence, new party is in, change the director and get somebody that is the same party as the president. I've always felt that intelligence ought to be kept out of politics, and I, therefore, was gratified and thrilled that I was given the chance to help

² Ibid, 16.

³ Ibid; Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 74; Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 119.

⁴ Allen W. Dulles, recorded interview by Thomas Braden, December 5 and 6, 1964, 4, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

establish the precedent that here we have a Democrat coming in taking over from a Republican...⁵

As part of this process, Dulles invited the new administration's top advisors to a formal dinner at a private club near the White House for a meet-and-greet with senior CIA staff. The dinner, which took place two weeks after Kennedy's inauguration, provided an opportunity for the CIA men to build rapport and dazzle the New Frontiersmen with jaw-dropping spy stories, but most importantly, to showcase the Agency's efficiency, capability, and innovative covert tactics.⁶

During a pleasant three-cocktail dinner, each senior CIA agent described briefly, in a sort of "New Yorkerish type precis," their role, the Agency's problems, and the important issues requiring special White House attention.⁷ As Desmond FitzGerald and Tracy Barnes spoke of their work, the Frontiersmen listened with glaring eyes, fascinated by what they heard about the Far East and the secret war against Castro. The two men managed to convince Kennedy's men that the CIA represented something bigger than J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Both were "charming and smooth, wellborn and well-taught," with a blend of "effortless grace and schoolboy panache;" and most importantly, they epitomized the real-life James Bonds.⁸ However, the real star that night was Bissell, who not only was intellectually imposing, but also had the reputation of being one of the smartest public servants in Washington. Unlike his counterparts, he looked more like a college professor than a James Bond. Nonetheless, when he spoke, his intellect captivated the audience. Using self-deprecating humor to break the ice with

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Amory, Jr. recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, February 9, 1966, 6, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-RAJ-01.aspx> (accessed May 2017); Steven Watts, *JFK and the Masculine Mystique: Sex and Power on the New Frontier* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 156-157.

⁷ Robert Amory, Jr. recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, February 9, 1966, 6, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁸ Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 119.

the audience, he claimed to be a “man-eating shark;” the room erupted in laughter.⁹ Bissell’s speech that night embodied the feel-good atmosphere of the event, where the action-oriented men of the CIA relied on their sophisticated confidence, bravado, and sardonic disdain for Washington’s pervasive bureaucracy to intellectually seduce the new administration.¹⁰

From that moment on, an unprecedented bromance blossomed between the White House and the CIA. As Robert Amory, deputy director/intelligence, put it, “from then on out there was nobody in the key White House staff I couldn’t pick up the phone and say, ‘Hey Larry...this is Bob.’”¹¹ Likewise, the administration felt that if they needed something done fast, the CIA was the place to go because other government agencies, such as the State Department, took “four to five days to answer a simple yes or no.”¹² No other individuals encapsulated this love affair between the CIA and the White House better than John Kennedy and Richard Bissell. Kennedy regarded Bissell as “one of the four or five brightest guys in the whole administration.”¹³ “You can’t beat brains,” he would tell his top advisors when speaking of Bissell.¹⁴ The fascination with the spymaster’s unparalleled intellect was understandable. As a graduate student, Bissell had devised and taught a groundbreaking undergrad course on Keynesian economics that became part of the curriculum for all economics majors at Yale – one of “brightest and the best,” one of Bissell’s students, was the president’s own national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy.¹⁵ Equally impressive was the fact that Bissell wrote his doctoral dissertation at a rate of twenty

⁹ Evan Thomas, “Wayward Spy,” *Civilization*, 2 (Sept.-Oct. 1995), 36.

¹⁰ Thomas, *The Very Best Man*, 238; Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, 119.

¹¹ Robert Amory, Jr. recorded interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, February 9, 1966, 6, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 72.

¹⁵ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 11.

pages a day.¹⁶ After a brief stint as a college professor, he went to work for the federal government, where he played a key role developing the Marshall Plan and the CIA's U-2 spy plane program. These types of professional triumphs did not go unnoticed by a president who valued intellect and success. When the rumor mill brought news to the White House that Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles wanted to make Bissell his chief deputy, the president immediately called the State Department. "You can't have him," the president said to Bowles, "he is going to take Allen Dulles' job on July 1."¹⁷ Kennedy intended to make Bissell a central figure in his administration.

Bissell shared the same admiration for the president. In Kennedy, he saw the "perfect" gentleman: a bright Harvard-educated man who could handle himself in a bar fight. He went as far as to compare Kennedy's leadership attributes to those of Julius Caesar. "If you were going to be an effective Cold Warrior," Bissell said of Kennedy, "you had to be a good orator in the Roman sense, but also had to be ready to make huge and ruthless decisions. Kennedy was Caesar."¹⁸ Even when he was part of the Eisenhower administration, the CIA man was not shy about his support for the Democratic candidate. During a planned meeting before the elections Bissell boldly admitted to Kennedy that he agreed with most of his political philosophy.¹⁹ He wanted Kennedy to win the elections. "I think Kennedy is surrounded by a group of men with a much livelier awareness than the Republicans of the extreme crisis that we are living in," Bissell wrote to his friend Edmond Thomas. "My guess is that Washington will be a more lively and interesting place in which to live and work."²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid, 13.

¹⁷ Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 72.

¹⁸ Thomas, *The Very Best Man*, 238.

¹⁹ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 159.

²⁰ Ibid, 159-160.

This “bromance” between the CIA and the White House played no small role in seducing the president into making the decision to endorse the ill-fated covert action plan to unseat Fidel Castro. Their relationship became a curse. The White House had been thoroughly convinced of the CIA’s invincibility. Dulles and his covert action gang had enamored the Frontiersmen with eclectic tales of their “brilliantly planned, virtually bloodless CIA overthrow of Guatemala’s leftist government and the reestablishment in power of the shah of Iran.”²¹ Listening to the accounts of the Iran and Guatemala operation made the new White House staff feel like underprivileged children visiting a large toy store. As Richard Goodwin, a young presidential aide, recalled, “the veil had been lifted on the alchemical magic of the clandestine, its power to transform the most innocent-seeming reality into an instrument of freedom’s struggle.”²² Kennedy and his lieutenants believed the CIA had the secret power to achieve the impossible. In this climate of schoolboy camaraderie and invincibility Kennedy received his presidential briefs on the Cuban operation.

The First Meeting

On 28 January 1961 – at a meeting attended by Vice-President Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, CIA Director Dulles, Assistant Secretary of International Security Paul Nitze, Assistant Secretary Mann, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, and General Lyman L. Lemnitzer – Dulles explained to the president how time for action in Cuba was running out, emphasizing the importance of expediency due to the unwanted presence of the Cuban Expeditionary Force (CEF) in Guatemala. “Cuba is now for practical purposes a Communist-controlled state,” the CIA boss told Kennedy, adding that “a

²¹ Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 169.

²² *Ibid.*

particular urgent question is the use to be made of a group of Cubans now training in Guatemala, who cannot remain indefinitely where they are."²³ This call for an immediate and quick resolution to the Cuban problem triggered a lengthy and contentious discussion among cabinet members.

Both Secretary Rusk and General Lemnitzer expressed their skepticism about the plan to unseat Castro, which called for the landing of approximately 1,000 men on a beachhead near the coastal city of Trinidad. General Lemnitzer estimated that "no course of action currently authorized by the United States government will be effective in reaching the agreed national goal of overthrowing the Castro regime."²⁴ According to the chairman, the CEF had neither the capacity to defeat a superior Castro force nor the strength to hold a small beachhead for an undetermined amount of time because Castro's forces already possessed the tactical advantage to generate enough combat power to overwhelm the CEF. In other words, the operation had "very little chance of success."²⁵ Any successful attempt to overthrow Castro would have to consist of an overt and direct U.S. military intervention in support of the CEF. Once the U.S. put the Cubans ashore, argued the chairman, the military would have to immediately come in and support them.²⁶ The day before the meeting the chairman forwarded a memorandum to Defense Secretary McNamara suggesting the formation of an Inter-Departmental Planning Group to develop a detailed plan of action for the overthrow of Castro.²⁷

²³ "Memorandum of Discussion on Cuba," 28 January 1961, Document 30, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David S. Patterson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), 62.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy," 25 January 1961, Document 26, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, 55.

²⁷ "Memorandum from the Joint Chief of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," 27 January 1961, Document 28, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, 58-59.

Secretary Rusk and his staff agreed that the operation had a poor chance of success, and opposed overt measures to get rid of Castro without first securing the full support of the Organization of American States (OAS). The top diplomat wanted to exhaust other available options before choosing explicit measures. As he had done previously, he called for the diplomatic isolation of Cuba by securing support from key OAS members like Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil. In the meantime, Secretary Rusk favored the continuation of the Eisenhower-approved covert action plan as the best course of action. The CIA record of the meeting noted that State preferred the employment of covert actions similar to the ones used against the Nazis during World War II.²⁸

The secret warriors countered the State and Department of Defense argument by espousing a more optimistic outlook. The Agency argued that the CEF would certainly seize a sizable piece of terrain on Cuban soil to establish a U.S.-backed provisional government and set in motion the downfall of the Castro regime. Dulles explained that the plan's "reasonable chance of success" meant a "greater than even likelihood" that it would, at a minimum, "elicit widespread rebellious activities and great disorganization" to produce a Cuban civil war.²⁹ Under these conditions, the United States could then sanction a military intervention by a "composite OAS force" in order to end the conflict in the island.³⁰

²⁸ "Memorandum for Record," 28 January 1961, Document 31, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d31> (accessed July 2017).

²⁹ "Cuba," 26 January 1961, Document 27, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 56-57.

³⁰ Ibid.

The sharp difference of opinions unsettled President Kennedy, who pointedly asked Dulles if the JCS had evaluated the plan. To Kennedy's surprise, the reply was "no." "I want that done as the very next step," the president said.³¹ He also ordered the following:

1. A continuation and accentuation of current activities of the CIA, including increased propaganda, increased political action, and increased sabotage.
2. The State Department was to prepare a concrete proposal for action with other Latin American countries to isolate the Castro regime and to bring against it the judgement of the Organization of American States.³²

The decision to get the Pentagon involved in the planning process marked the beginning of the end for the CIA's autonomy over the orchestration of covert operations. During the operations in Iran and Guatemala the spymasters had kept the Pentagon away. When the generals showed signs of wanting a "piece of the pie," the CIA simply stiff-armed them by saying: "You will not become involved in this; the United States military will be kept out of this; you will not tell anybody in your service."³³ The new presidential guidance ended this pattern. For the first time, the Dulles faction had to reluctantly let another government agency examine their plan.

The Pentagon's promotion to evaluator can be attributed to Kennedy's deep respect for the professional military and his short-lived alliance with military officers. As a senator, Kennedy cultivated strong ties with military leaders who had publicly opposed Eisenhower's New Look policy of massive nuclear retaliation and deep cuts on defense spending. One of the most outspoken critics of the New Look had been the former Army Chief of Staff under the Eisenhower administration, General Maxwell Taylor. General Taylor believed that Eisenhower's doctrine of massive nuclear retaliation left the military – especially the Army – ill-prepared for

³¹ Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, July 5, 1967, 10, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

³² Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 9.

³³ Arleigh A. Burke, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, January 20, 1967, 22, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-ARB-01.aspx> (accessed July 2017).

ground combat in "localized or limited conflicts, especially in the emerging political battlegrounds of the Third World."³⁴ As a presidential candidate Kennedy seized on this "legalized insubordination" by the generals to trumpet a defense program based on Taylor's policy of flexible response, promising significant defense spending and a sizeable increase in conventional Army forces to fight the nonnuclear battles and the Communist guerrillas.³⁵ Due to this politically convenient civil-military alliance, and Kennedy's respect for the generals, the new administration counted on the military being honest brokers on key foreign policy decisions. The honeymoon lasted less than one hundred days.

Evaluation of the CIA Plan

Following the 28 January meeting, the Pentagon sent a group of colonels to the CIA's headquarters at Langley to study the operational plan. These officers expected to examine large volumes of documents containing maps and timetables, but instead they got a very generic verbal description of the plan. The Dulles faction told the colonels that the main target was the city of Trinidad, where supposedly opposition to Castro was the strongest. Once in Trinidad, the CEF would double in size by recruiting from dissident groups located in the region and joining forces with the sizeable bodies of anti-Castro guerrillas operating near the Escambray mountains. An airborne detachment would seal off the city by blocking the key avenues of approach. The colonels feverishly jotted down these watered-down details and returned to the Pentagon to write their assessment of the plan.³⁶

The colonels wrote their findings in a memorandum entitled "Military Evaluation of the CIA Para-Military Plan, Cuba," and forwarded it to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on 3

³⁴ Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent & Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19.

³⁵ Ibid, 18-19.

³⁶ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 244.

February. The three-page report highlighted serious shortcomings and characterized the operation as high-risk. Success depended not on military action, but on unconfirmed levels of local Cuban support that could trigger a sizeable uprising within the island. No reserve force existed, and the CEF would lack freedom of maneuver on the beaches. In addition, the air strikes against Castro's forces had to be precise and effective or the ground assault would fail. The personnel and logistical support for the operation was "inadequate," and the combat effectiveness of the CEF was questionable because it was based on second and third-hand reports. The evaluation revealed a deeply flawed plan.³⁷

On 8 February, Kennedy held another meeting to discuss the Pentagon's findings. The key participants were NSC adviser McGeorge Bundy, Rusk, Charles Bohlen, Berle and Mann from the State Department, McNamara, William Bundy, Haydn Williams and Nitze from the Department of Defense, and Dulles, Bissell, and Barnes from the CIA. Instead of Secretary McNamara briefing, it was Bissell who led the discussion. Leaving out the most unflattering appraisal of the plan, the WH/4 chief reported that after a careful study by the JCS, the plan "had a fair chance of success" – "success" meaning the ability for the CEF to survive, hold ground, and attract support from the Cuban population.³⁸ He failed to clarify that by "fair chance" the colonels "meant less than one in three."³⁹ In the worst-case scenario, the CEF would reach the Escambray mountains to continue fighting as guerrillas. Kennedy remained unconvinced. He considered the enterprise too big, and pressed for other alternatives. The president asked: "Could not such a force be landed gradually and quietly and make its first major military efforts from the mountains – then taking shape as a Cuban force within Cuba, not as an invasion force sent by the

³⁷ "Military Evaluation of the Cuban Plan," 3 February 1961, Document 35, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, 68-77.

³⁸ "Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy," 8 February 1961, Document 40, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962*, 91.

³⁹ Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 245.

Yankees?"⁴⁰ Bissell pushed back, stating that other uses for the CEF were impractical, but the Agency would carefully study the matter. Nonetheless, the Agency sought to apply pressure on the president by dictating a no-later-than date. "If the troops are to land on top form," Bissell told the president, "the operation should not be delayed, at the longest, beyond March 31, and the decision to land for it must be made before D-minus 21."⁴¹

The State Department continued calling for the diplomatic isolation of Cuba. Secretary Rusk reiterated that without the support of the OAS the operation would harm U.S prestige and relations with Latin American countries. Berle backed his boss: "It would be impossible, as things stand now, to avoid being cast in the role of aggressor."⁴² Mr. Rusk ended with a cautionary note on making foreign policy decisions based on the exigencies of time, telling the group that "U.S policy should not be driven to drastic and irrevocable choice by the urgencies, however real, of a single battalion of men."⁴³ The meeting yielded no major policy decision, except the authorization to form a small political junta of anti-Castro leaders with a strong left-of-center balance to provide the CEF a sense of political direction and purpose.⁴⁴

Feeling the Pressure

After the two meetings, Kennedy came under immense pressure to make a decision on Cuba, but remained hesitant about blatantly exposing the U.S. hand. His own special assistant, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., admitted that a plausible argument to invade Cuba existed, especially if "one excludes everything but Cuba itself and looks only at the pace of military consolidation

⁴⁰ "Memorandum of Meeting with President Kennedy," 8 February 1961, Document 40, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 91.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

within Cuba and the mounting impatience of the armed exiles.”⁴⁵ However, Schlesinger was unequivocal on his opposition. “As one begins to broaden the focus beyond Cuba to include the hemisphere and the rest of the world,” he wrote to Kennedy, “the arguments against this decision begin to gain force.”⁴⁶ He warned the president about the inability to avoid blame and its repercussions:

However well disguised any action might be, it will be ascribed to the United States. The result would be a wave of massive protest, agitation and sabotage throughout Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa (not to speak of Canada and of certain quarters in the United States). Worst of all, this would be your first dramatic foreign policy initiative. At one stroke, it would dissipate all the extraordinary good will which has been rising toward the new administration through the world. It would fix a malevolent image of the new administration in the minds of millions.⁴⁷

Despite the warning, circumstances and people applied immense pressure on the president to move forward with the plan. The presence of the CEF in Guatemala could not be maintained for very long. The impending arrival of the rainy season, the inadequacy of camp facilities, and the precarious political situation made their continued presence in that country problematic. The president had two options: commit the CEF to action as soon as possible or bring the force back to American soil in order to break it up and disperse it. The latter contained serious political risks. The dispersion of the CEF would have led to accusations of “chickening out.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ “Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant to President Kennedy,” 11 February 1961, Document 43, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 93.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, July 5, 1967, 5, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program; McGeorge Bundy, recorded interview by Richard Neustadt, March 1964, 3-4, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-MGB-01.aspx> (accessed July 2017); “Evaluation of the CIA Cuban Volunteer Task Force,” Document 56, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 120.

Kennedy's own tough talk also backfired on him. In his inaugural speech he had promised to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend," and "oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." As a presidential candidate he sharply criticized the Eisenhower administration for their inaction in Cuba. During a debate he scolded Richard Nixon for his inability to deal with Castro. "If you can't stand up to Castro, how can you be expected to stand up to Khrushchev," Kennedy told Nixon.⁴⁹ He had also called for American aid to Cuban fighters "seeking to overthrow the Castro regime."⁵⁰ After using such tough and inflammatory language, the cancellation of the anti-Castro operation became inconceivable. Doing so would have opened the door to political attacks and criticism. No other person understood this better than Robert Kennedy. "If he hadn't gone ahead with it," stated the president's brother, "everybody would have said it showed that he had no courage."⁵¹ McGeorge Bundy, the president's national security advisor, put it more bluntly: "If we didn't do it [the operation], the Republicans would have said: 'We were all set to beat Castro, and this chicken, this antsy-pantsy bunch of liberals...' Saying no would have brought all the hawks out of the woodwork."⁵² As a result, everyone within the president's inner circle, excluding Arthur Schlesinger, convincingly reminded Kennedy of the pernicious consequences of cancelling the operation.⁵³

Meanwhile, Kennedy continued to press for alternatives. He favored a gradual infiltration into Cuba – the model being that of the Jedburghs of WWII with support from U.S. planes, ships, and supplies – over what he considered a full-fledged "invasion." Kennedy, like the State

⁴⁹ Russell Baker, "Kennedy Steps Up Attacks on Nixon," *New York Times*, October 16, 1960.

⁵⁰ Persons, *Bay of Pigs*, 19.

⁵¹ Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night," 25.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³ Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, July 5, 1967, 5, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Department, preferred the plan Eisenhower had approved in the spring of 1960, but the CIA insisted that such a course of action was no longer feasible, while omitting to mention that the original plan had been a complete failure. Instead, the Dulles faction increased their pressure.

The Decision

On 17 February, the president convened another meeting at the White House with Rusk, Berle, Mann, Bohlen, Dulles, Bissell, Barnes, and Brigadier General David W. Gray as participants. This time Kennedy wanted to hear from Department of State and CIA officials their differing views on how to proceed with the anti-Castro operation. Unsurprisingly, the Agency continued selling the landing force approach. As if to remind the president and add weight to his argument, Bissell reiterated what the JCS had said: "this plan has a fair chance of ultimate success."⁵⁴ He then went on to make the following compelling argument:

...if ultimate success is not achieved there is every likelihood that the landing can be the means of establishing in favorable terrain a powerful guerrilla force which could be sustained almost indefinitely. The latter outcome would not be a serious defeat. It would be the means of exerting continuing pressure on the regime and would be a continuing demonstration of inability of the regime to establish order. It could create an opportunity for an OAS intervention to impose a cease-fire and hold elections.⁵⁵

The diplomats held their ground as well. Secretary Rusk called for the delay of the operation until the administration could gather enough support from the OAS. Rusk and Berle believed that "support could be generated in Latin America but not by 31 March."⁵⁶ The CIA pushed for a 5 March D-Day, citing that this was the date Agency planners had chosen for the execution of the military plan; Kennedy was not to be pressured into action. The president again restated his

⁵⁴ "Cuba," 17 February 1961, Document 46, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 - September 1962*, 103.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Editorial Note," Document 48, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 - September 1962*.

preference for a more “moderate approach to the problem,” and delayed the final decision by a month.⁵⁷

Determined to get presidential approval, the Agency again came prepared to sell the Trinidad plan to Kennedy. On 11 March, Bissell pitched the Trinidad plan to the president and key members of his cabinet. He enthusiastically laid out the plan to put the CEF on a beach near the city of Trinidad. “This operation,” Bissell stated, “would involve an amphibious/airborne assault with concurrent (but no prior) tactical air support, to seize a beachhead contiguous to terrain suitable for guerrilla operations.”⁵⁸ Kennedy did not let Bissell finish the brief. Although the overall strategy made sense to Kennedy – the CEF could make their way to the mountains and replicate Castro’s own Sierra Maestra success – the operation was “too noisy.” “It sounds like D-Day,” the president said, “You have to reduce the noise level of this thing.”⁵⁹ The unexpected interruption rattled the former Yale professor, who in a desperate attempt, tried to lecture the young president. “But you have to understand...” said Bissell, before Kennedy cut him off.⁶⁰ Kennedy said he “understood him perfectly,” but the plan violated the political dimensions he had established for the operation.⁶¹ The president still wanted a low-profile insertion, even if it meant taking greater military risks. He would not take the political risk of approving a plan that exposed “the role of the United States so openly.”⁶² The guerrilla option was the only acceptable component of the plan. Kennedy liked the option of retreating to the

⁵⁷ Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 65; Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night,” 23.

⁵⁸ “Proposed Operation Against Cuba,” Document 58, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 141.

⁵⁹ Gus Russo and Stephen Molton, *Brothers in Arms: The Kennedys, the Castros, and the Politics of Murder* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 108.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 169.

“contiguous mountain area” to “continue operations as a powerful guerrilla force.”⁶³ The president gave the CIA an unrealistic four days to rework the plan and come up with an acceptable alternative that would meet all the combined military, political, psychological considerations: a “quiet” night landing, not a World War II-type amphibious assault. The landing site had to include an airfield capable of supporting B-26 operations.⁶⁴

Four days later, on 15 March, the CIA returned with a revised scheme: The Zapata Plan. This time, the WH/4 boss put on a real “sales job,” relying on the pressure tactics of a used-car salesman to get the thing approved by the president. Bissell began the brief by underscoring the fact that the new plan unequivocally met the presidential requirement of using a small and quiet night-time “infiltration of guerrillas in support of an internal revolution.”⁶⁵ He went on to explain how the new landing site, *Bahia de Cochinos* (Bay of Pigs), possessed a formidable operational and tactical advantage:

The area selected is located at the head of a well-protected deep-water estuary on the south coast of Cuba. It is almost surrounded by swamps impenetrable to infantry in any numbers and entirely impenetrable to vehicles, except along two narrow and easily defended approaches. Although strategically isolated by terrain features, the area is near the center of the island and the presence of an opposition force there will soon become known to the entire population of Cuba and constitute a serious threat to the regime. The beachhead area contains one and possibly two air strips adequate to handle B-26's. There are several good landing beaches. It is of interest that this area has been the scene of resistance activities and of outright guerrilla warfare for over a hundred years.⁶⁶

Towards the end of the brief, as if to apply added weight and pressure, Bissell again reminded the president of the political risks of cancelling the operation: “the alternative would appear to be the demobilization of the paramilitary force and the return of its members to the United States. It

⁶³ “Proposed Operation Against Cuba,” Document 58, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 142.

⁶⁴ Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 13.

⁶⁵ “Revised Cuban Operation,” Document 61, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume X, Cuba, January 1961 – September 1962, 146.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 147.

is, of course, well understood that this course of action too involves certain risks.”⁶⁷ Kennedy still found the new arrangement “too noisy.” The planned air strikes made him uneasy. He repeatedly asked Bissell if the air strikes were necessary and would not take “yes” for an answer.⁶⁸ Furthermore, he dislike the idea of landing the CEF at dawn. The president “felt that in order to make this appear as an inside guerrilla-type operation, the ships should be clear of the area by dawn.”⁶⁹ He ordered a new revision and that another meeting be held the following day.

The next morning, 16 March, Kennedy heard the revisions to the plan. As directed, the landing would take place at night – a feat that had only been accomplished once during World War II – and the attack would start with air strikes two days prior to the invasion taking place. Another wave of air strikes would follow two days later to destroy any remaining targets and disable Castro’s microwave radio links. The latter was critical because it would render useless Castro’s secured radio communication, thus forcing his military commanders to use open-voice communication. After listening closely to the brief, Kennedy gave his preliminary lukewarm approval, but not before reminding Bissell that he could still cancel the operation twenty-four hours before execution.⁷⁰

Kennedy’s final and definitive approval took place on 4 April. During this meeting, the president indicated once more his preference for the infiltration of small groups of Cubans, but again, he was told “no.” The CIA explained that the piecemeal deployment of small contingents would not get the job done. Reluctantly, Kennedy accepted the revised Cuban plan, and put it up for a vote. “Do you favor going ahead with this operation?” the president asked.⁷¹ Everyone,

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 171.

⁷¹ McGeorge Bundy, recorded interview by Richard Neustadt, March 1964, 9, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

except Senator William Fulbright, who Kennedy invited as a special guest, responded in the affirmative. After all, the president's men felt that action was better than inaction, in particular Adolf Berle, who just a month before had opposed launching the operation. This time, Berle acknowledged that a cancellation was risky, but if the operation succeeded, the rewards would be many.⁷² With this view in mind, he rolled the dice and told Kennedy to "let her rip."⁷³ After demanding some additional tweaking to the plan, Kennedy gave his final approval on 12 April. Five days later the CEF landed in Cuba to take part in one of the biggest foreign policy blunders in modern American history.

Inflated Assertions, Misunderstandings, and Naivete

The 15 March "sales pitch" by the CIA contained nothing but inflated assertions, the central one being the notion that if the CEF could not hold their position, "they would then become guerrillas," and their presence would ignite an internal revolt.⁷⁴ Castro's forces had devastated the Escambray guerrillas and the CEF had been trained not as insurgents but as a conventional force; and similar to the Florida everglades, the region surrounding the Bay of Pigs is swampy and uninhabited, lacking the essential geographical features to carry out a successful guerrilla campaign. The likelihood of igniting an internal revolt in such a remote region was slim. Also, the Agency's assertion that the *Cienaga de Zapata* (Zapata Swamp) had "been the scene of resistance activities and of outright guerrilla warfare for over a hundred years" was completely false. Before the Bay of Pigs invasion, this region had never experienced any sort of warfare. Even the *Mambises* (Cuban revolutionaries) avoided the region during their fight for independence against Spain. General Maximo Gomez, the military leader of Cuba's war for

⁷² Jones, *The Bay of Pigs*, 66, 68-69.

⁷³ Richard Bissell, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, July 5, 1967, 27, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁷⁴ Ibid; Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, 86.

independence and expert in guerrilla warfare, viewed the Bay of Pigs peninsula as a “geographical and military trap.”⁷⁵ In his memoir, Bissell admits that he and other Agency leaders misled the president and his advisors about the CEF option of melting into the surrounding area to fight as a guerrilla force. “It must be admitted,” wrote Bissell, “that we either encouraged or allowed the president and his advisers to believe that in the event of uncontrollable pressure at the beachhead the brigade could retire and thereby protect the guerrilla option.”⁷⁶

The discussions on the Cuban operation required candor from Agency leaders. They needed to tell Kennedy that the operation had to be “spectacular” to succeed because their model was Operation PBSUCCESS. The CIA planned to use the CEF as a psychological decoy to scare Castro out of office – just like they had used Castillo Armas’ “army” to get rid of Arbenz. To do this, they hoped the amphibious landing and size of the CEF would trick Castro into believing that U.S Marines were right behind them; but Bissell omitted this key point during his meetings with Kennedy. Instead, he incorrectly assumed that when push came to shove, Kennedy would follow Eisenhower’s *modus operandi* and not let the operation fail. Bissell and the rest of the Dulles faction thought Kennedy would live up to the Eisenhower philosophy of “when you commit the American flag, you commit it to win.”⁷⁷ Dulles himself “felt that when the chips were down, when the crisis arose in reality, any action required for success would be authorized rather than permit the enterprise to fail.”⁷⁸ This calculus proved costly for the Agency.

To paraphrase Piero Gleijeses, the Kennedy administration and the CIA were like ships passing in the night. A significant failure in communication led to a disastrous misunderstanding between Kennedy and the CIA about what would happen if the invasion did not go according to

⁷⁵ Aguilar, *Operation Zapata*, xiii.

⁷⁶ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 172.

⁷⁷ Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

plan. Both parties agreed that a successful establishment of a beachhead by the CEF would cause the collapse of the Castro regime. But for Kennedy, if that collapse failed to materialize, the invaders could still fade away into the Escambray mountains to become guerrillas. For the CIA, it meant sending the Marines to finish the job.⁷⁹

Kennedy's fixated concern about blatantly exposing the U.S. hand showed naivete and a lack of common sense on his part. By early April 1961 the press had announced to the world the "unmistakable signs" of an immediate and inevitable invasion of Cuba. One article explained that for nearly nine months a Cuban exile force "dedicated to the overthrow of Premier Fidel Castro have been training in the United States as well as in Central America."⁸⁰ The story revealed how much the press and public knew about the anti-Castro operation. These articles incensed Kennedy. "I can't believe what I'm reading!" the president told his press secretary. "Castro doesn't need agents over here. All he has to do is read our papers!"⁸¹ The administration asked publishers to cancel or delay such publications, but they demurred, choosing instead to blur the most compromising details. These newspaper stories and other published reports made it abundantly clear that the U.S. government was leading a clandestine operation to overthrow Castro.⁸²

The deluge of front page stories on the Cuban operation made the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. William Fulbright, uneasy. As the stories kept mounting and were repeated, the senator concluded that the government was secretly supporting an invasion of Cuba. "The idea jelled that they [Kennedy Administration] were really serious about this in

⁷⁹ Gleijeses, "Ships in the Night," 39.

⁸⁰ "Anti-Castro Units Trained to Fight at Florida Bases," *New York Times*, April 7, 1961.

⁸¹ Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York: Avon, 1966), 194; W. Joseph Campbell, *Getting it Wrong: Debunking the Greatest Myths in American Journalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2010), 94.

⁸² Campbell, *Getting it Wrong*, 94-95.

March,” admitted Fulbright.⁸³ While traveling with Kennedy to Florida for the Easter holiday, the senator gave the president a memorandum highlighting his concerns about the stories in the papers. The memo warned the administration about undoing three decades worth of efforts to repair the damages of previous interventions in the Western Hemisphere: “The Castro regime is a thorn in the flesh; but it is not a dagger in the heart...and to revert to the Teddy Roosevelt of intervention in Cuba would set us back another two generations.”⁸⁴ Not only did Kennedy fail to realize that the U.S. hand had already been blatantly exposed by the media, he also ignored the warnings from his friend, Senator Fulbright, and Special Assistant Arthur Schlesinger.

The military’s unrealistic appraisal of the chances of success showed how the Pentagon too was under the spell of CIA invincibility. In their eyes, a small and insignificant island in the Caribbean presented no major obstacle to what McNamara and the generals characterized as “well-established plan and policy” by the CIA and the previous administration.⁸⁵ In other words, the CIA had proven its worth at snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. General Lemnitzer sat idle on the sidelines without vocalizing his explicit concerns to the president because he was a “relic of the Eisenhower years.”⁸⁶ As an Eisenhower general – like most of the holdover brass who formed part of the JCS – he was programmed to hold views “in accord with those of the president” and not ruffle any feathers.⁸⁷ Therefore, he opted to voice his concerns to Secretary McNamara hoping that the Defense Secretary would pass along the message to the president. In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy lamented having such military advisors. “My

⁸³ J. William Fulbright recorded interview by Pat Holt, April 11, 1964, 44, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Bay of Pigs*, 65.

⁸⁵ Robert S. McNamara, recorded interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., April 4, 1964, 13, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-RSM-01.aspx> (accessed July 2017).

⁸⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 68.

⁸⁷ Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 17.

God," he complained, "the bunch of advisors we inherited."⁸⁸ After the fiasco, Kennedy saw the JCS and CIA as "soft spots," and "would never be overawed" again by their advice or by what they represented.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid, 84.

⁸⁹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 290.

Conclusion

The CIA's improbable success in Iran and Guatemala highlighted an era of U.S.-sponsored covert operations. The TPAJAX project was a simple operation compared to PBSUCCESS. In Iran, the task simply consisted of placing the shah – who retained the support of the military and easily activated popular support – back in power. PBSUCCESS raised the level of difficulty. The CIA faced the herculean task of replacing an extremely popular and democratically elected president. To do this, planners carefully devised an elaborate plan consisting of an intensive propaganda campaign and paramilitary program. The method, scale, and conception of these covert operations had no antecedent, and their success convinced many in the Eisenhower administration, including the president himself, of the effectiveness and operational value of clandestine activities. Covert operations appeared a safe and inexpensive way of resisting Communist expansion in the Third World. This obdurate reliance on clandestinity, reeking with American exceptionalist improvidence, culminated in the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

The CIA, emboldened by its earlier successes, became the victim of institutional hubris. Both TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS created “false positives” impelling the Agency's planning and execution of the JMATE project. These “unblemished triumphs” prevented the recognition of salient shortcomings in the anti-Castro operation. As Richard Bissell later wrote in his memoirs, “the success in Guatemala, combined with the previous success in Iran in 1953, led Washington policymakers to overestimate the Agency's abilities in the area of covert action.”¹ Of course, typical of the Dulles faction's particularism, Bissell deflected responsibility from the CIA and put it on the “many policymakers OUTSIDE of the CIA” who saw covert action as “an easy way

¹ Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 90.

to deal with hostile foreign leaders and renegade nation-states.”² However, the most ardent promoters of covert action in Washington were not the policymakers; they were Allen Dulles and his proteges. Had the operations in Iran and Guatemala failed, an Agency postmortem would have revealed how imperfect these operations had been in attempting to mirror-image the aspirations of other nations and trying to enforce western democratic values in regions where culture and history made it impracticable. But since success obviated the postmortems – the analysts at Langley did critique the shortcomings, but bureaucratically were sidelined – momentum continued driving the covert action program at the expense of common sense and realities on the ground. The CIA continued relying on the same tactics, techniques, and procedures used in TPAJAX and PBSUCCESS to solve the “Cuban problem,” leading to the Bay of Pigs disaster. As one CIA agent luminously remarked, “If the Agency had not had Guatemala, it probably would not have had Cuba.”³ The same was true for Guatemala: without Iran there would never have been a Guatemala.

The overthrow of Mossadeq in Iran succeeded not because of CIA involvement, but because of good fortune. The operation was a squeaker, where Agency carelessness engendered a Mossadeq counter coup that almost derailed the entire enterprise. The prime minister thwarted American efforts by arresting collaborators and forcing the shah to flee. Only the unilateral actions of General Zahedi changed the outcome of the operation. While CIA operatives hid in safe houses receiving cables telling them to leave the country immediately, the retired, pro-shah general utilized the shah’s popularity to muster enough unforeseen conservative support – from the mullahs and bazaari who resisted Mossadeq’s secularism – to oust the nationalist prime minister. The Iranian people took to the streets demanding the return of the shah and the removal

² Ibid.

³ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala*, 190.

of Mossadeq for violating the shah's *firmands*. In the immediate aftermath of Mossadeq's overthrow, the CIA disingenuously took credit for the operation's success, ignoring the mistakes and hailing the victory as a confirmation of the value of covert action.

The overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Arbenz in Guatemala followed the same general line as the Iranian operation: another unimaginable triumph of luck hailed as a great success. The Agency committed the same operational mistakes, which allowed Arbenz to take action against the U.S-backed opposition; except he vacillated, setting the stage for an internal military coup. Washington hailed Arbenz' overthrow by his own military as another victory against communism. Inside the CIA everyone forgot how their mistakes plunged the operation into a downward spiral. Those involved, especially the Dulles faction, became so elated that they overlooked the different ways everything could have gone wrong. According to Piero Gleijeses, who has written extensively on Guatemala and Cuba, "what remained was a tale of great success without any awareness of how flawed the operation had been."⁴

The validation of the covert action program as an "effective" foreign policy option placed Allen Dulles and his gang of true believers on the catbird seat. Under the directorship of Bedell Smith, the Dulles faction remained on a tight leash. With his departure, the chains came off, and the Dulles gang set out to implement his philosophy on covert action – even when past experiences had shown that covert action often ended in defeat. As the CIA director, Dulles gave his proteges a blank check on clandestinity. Their journey began in Iran, where the removal of Mossadeq gave them credibility in Washington, and the overthrow of Arbenz made them superstars. Elements of the Agency that questioned covert action policy were unceremoniously sidelined. When internal disagreements threatened control over the Guatemalan operation, the

⁴ Conor Doyle, "'PBSUCCESS' and the Bay of Pigs: The Dangers of Precedent," *Centre for the Study of the United States: Undergraduate Journal of American Studies* VI (2010-2011): 50.

director quickly intervened and silenced the opposition. To avoid similar problems with the Cuban operation, the CIA boss ordered the creation of a separate headquarters – the WH/4 – where all decision makers belonged to the covert action camp and had participated either in the Iran or Guatemala operations.

Riding the wave of success, the CIA jumped into action in the spring of 1960 by launching the “Program of Covert Action Against the Castro Regime.” By the fall the operation had become a complete failure because the same mistakes from past operations plagued the anti-Castro program. As usual, the main culprit was Agency negligence fueled by overconfidence. The sloppy work and a lack of understanding of the operational environment inside and outside the island by those involved in the project had dire consequences. Pulitzer Prize winner journalist David Halberstam agreed: “too many experts who knew remarkably little either about the country involved or about their own country; too many decisions by private men... as opposed to public ones” led to the approval of “a plan based on little understanding of the situation” which doomed the operation to failure.⁵ Castro soon found out about the operation, and reacted with lethal precision, eliminating opposition and consolidating his power. For the CIA, the creation of the *Frente Revolucionario Democrático* (FRD), the anti-Castro propaganda campaign (Radio Swan), and the paramilitary force proved problematic due to the almost total absence of assessment of Cuban politics and culture. The warning signs flashed like a beacon on a hilltop, but the Dulles faction knowingly ignored them as in the past. They mistakenly learned and accepted that the payoff for boldness and determination was victory. Therefore, the Agency continued the mission, recommending the invasion plan to Eisenhower and then selling it to Kennedy, convinced that success was inevitable.

⁵ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 66.

The pull of CIA invincibility and hubris, engendered by the successes of the past, led to the approval of an operation that had no chance of succeeding. The Agency was so committed to the invasion plan, and so certain of its success, that the Dulles faction feverishly pushed for its approval at any cost. For the Kennedy administration, the bromance with the Agency turned into a curse. The New Frontiersmen were too trusting and admiring of the real life "James Bonds" and of the generals. This blind trust led to Kennedy casting his luck with the CIA operation because he preferred dumping the CEF in Cuba rather than bringing them back to American soil and dealing with the political repercussions. Kennedy's inexperience played a role as well. The young president was no Eisenhower. Eisenhower was decisive when he decided not to do something, a quality that Kennedy needed but did not have. In the end, the Cuban operation became an emphatic "strike three, you are out" for the American government; and for the Dulles-led CIA, an ignominious ending to a journey that started in Iran and ended on the shores of *Playa Giron*.

The implications of the Cuban debacle were significant. Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, Indonesia, and the Congo all demonstrated the jaundiced American view of the Non-Aligned Movement among developing nations that produced a myopia in Washington viewing the world either as white or black – no shades of grey. The Bay of Pigs embarrassment stung Kennedy. The young, egotistical president desperately wanted to prove his worth and toughness. He remained eager to flex his muscles and score a significant foreign policy victory. Barely a month after the fiasco, Kennedy met Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna for the much anticipated summit conference. Their meeting did not go well. In the words of Halberstam: "the tensions of the world... seemed to intensify rather than ebb with the meeting; Khrushchev had attacked, and

Kennedy, surprised, had finally rejoined.”⁶ Vienna increased already high tensions between the two world superpowers. Kennedy left the meeting shaken by his encounter with the Soviet leader. In a private interview with *New York Times* columnist James Reston, he confessed that the meeting had been the “roughest thing” in his life. He believed Khrushchev’s aggressive behavior stemmed from the Bay of Pigs. “I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who got into it, and didn’t see it through, had no guts,” Kennedy told Reston.⁷ The young president understood he had a credibility problem with the Soviet leader. Determined to regain his credibility and show he had “guts,” Kennedy decided to make his stand in Southeast Asia – the only place in the world at the time that presented a real challenge. “Now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible,” the president said, “and Vietnam looks like the place.”⁸

The desperate need to regain credibility on the world stage and secure wavering domestic support created by the failure to oust Castro put the U.S. government on a full speed collision course with Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh. Kennedy’s tough language on communism on the campaign trail and his “call to action” in his inaugural boomeranged on him with a vengeance. His political adversaries charged him with being soft on communism, just as he had done with Eisenhower. Kennedy pledged to contain communism, but failed in Cuba, making him look weak and inexperienced to Khrushchev and the world. The Cuban misadventure amplified the need for a strong stand in Laos and Vietnam, “to justify [Kennedy’s] cold war credentials by preserving America’s ‘offspring,’” the Republic of South Vietnam.⁹ The Bay of Pigs set the conditions for the eventual military intervention in Vietnam and the quagmire that followed.

⁶ Ibid, 75.

⁷ Ibid, 76.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 87-88.

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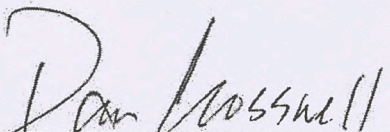
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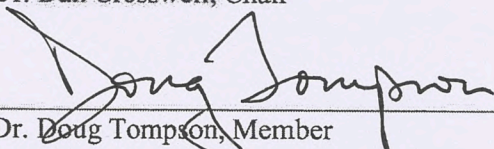
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